

ISSUE 71 2007

# cineACTION

## SEXUALITY IN THE CINEMA

CLAIRE DENIS  
FELLINI  
VAL LEWTON  
TSAI MING-LIANG  
PATRICK TAM  
FILM FESTIVALS

\$8 CDN \$7 US





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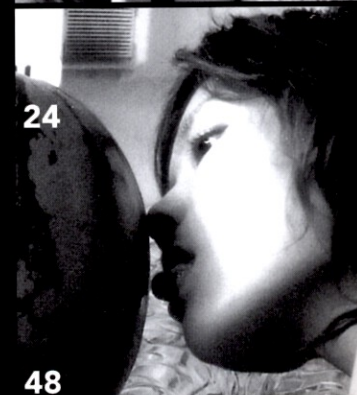
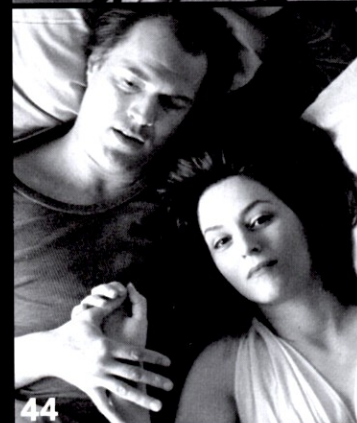
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This issue is centred on the idea of sexuality, which is so intrinsic to the cinema. We received a diverse range of responses, covering both contemporary and classical cinema, mainstream and avant-garde.

In addition, it contains 2006 Toronto International Film Festival reviews, many of deserving films that will sadly never find distribution. The issue also features a recent tribute to Robin Wood which took place in May 2006 at York University, Toronto. We wish to add our congratulations to Robin and publicly thank him for his immense contributions to film criticism.

Robin, Andrew Britton and the two of us shared ideas and inspired each other to pursue serious critical writing at the time when it was not particularly fashionable with the academic world. We thank Robin for this, and his friendship and support.

**Celebrating Rossellini** 2006 marked the centenary of Roberto Rossellini and we wish to acknowledge his extraordinary contribution to the cinema. The recent extensive retrospective of Rossellini's work at Cinematheque Toronto offered an opportunity to more fully appreciate the diversity of his work and the range of its accomplishments. Rossellini's identification with neo-realism overwhelms his reputation as an innovative filmmaker and creative artist. As an auteur, Rossellini was consistent in his humanism; he was committed to reinventing the world after WW II, reaffirming the necessity of a spirituality within the natural world and an emotional generosity to all aspects of human life.

Rossellini's cinema is at base one of ideas and intelligence. The war film trilogy, *Rome Open City*, *Paisan*, *Germany Year Zero*, present the raw emotions that were apart of the reality of war and its aftermath. These films have strong affiliations with the melodrama. This continues in the director-actor collaborations with Anna Magnani and Ingrid Bergman. Although these works employ conventions of the melodrama and specifically gender issues, they move beyond the constraints of the genre into a form that is more personal and arguably more experimental. Ironically the Bergman films, while evidencing Rossellini's commitment to realist aesthetics through the use of location, improvisation and a largely non-professional supporting cast, depend heavily on a professional actor to give them weight and meaning. Space does not permit a fuller discussion but, suffice it to say, the Rossellini-Bergman collaborations, as Andre Bazin understood, completely rethink the parameters of narrativity and documentation.

Rossellini remained consistent with his concerns with exploring human potential and endeavour in his late works, such as *Socrates*, *Blaise Pascal* and *The Rise of Louis XIV*. These films redefine notions of performance, storytelling and the relationship between personal and social history and again speak of his fearlessness and audacity in dealing with form and content.

The Rossellini retrospective reaffirmed our admiration and respect for this great filmmaker whose work provides many pleasures. It also reminded us of the cinema's centrality to human life.

—Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe

#### CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

##### ISSUE #72 State of the Art:

##### Film and Film Criticism Today

We encourage a variety of approaches, positions and topics on the subject of cinema at the beginning of the 21st century. Papers should be submitted in hard copy only, mailed directly to Susan Morrison, the editor of this issue. Once accepted for publication, the paper will then be emailed as a file attachment.

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Ingrid Bergman  
in Rossellini's *Fear*





# The Silent, Black Centre in the Early Features of CLAIRE DENIS

KATHARINE ASALS  
*(pour la famille Verna)*

French films, like French culture, have a reputation on the international circuit for being talky, exhibiting the cleverness of exchange, a love of debate. Within this tendency towards elegantly wordy, intellectually demanding work<sup>1</sup>, the films of Claire Denis show a distinctively laconic, understated aesthetic, with an approach of quiet, pondering observation of the human body, the soma observed in space. Her narratives are loose—based more on impressions and small moments than plot. Scenes give some of the pieces of the puzzle, but leave many things unexplained, disconnected. She builds an aura of mystery and sexual charisma around many of her central characters, relying more on a cinematic contemplation of gesture and expression, without the psychological exposition of dialogue-heavy work and traditional shot/counter-shot filmmaking. Of this often silent, somatic approach Denis herself has said, “I’m not saying this as a joke: capturing bodies on film is the only thing that interests me”.<sup>2</sup> Unusual in any filmmaker, male or





female, is that her gaze is directed largely towards the male body—however, it is perhaps most surprising to find a woman filmmaker whose films are more about men than about women.

This paper will look at Denis' first three feature films: *Chocolat* (1988), *S'en fout la mort* (1990), and *J'ai pas sommeil* (1993), all of which reveal this early emphasis on silent observation of bodies in space, all of which are marked by a sense of sexual tension and possibility. More particularly, these three films focus on and observe black men in some of the central roles. What interests me here is that, while the regard directed to the black men in these films can be seen as one of fetishization, of eroticizing the black male body, it can also be understood to be crucial to Denis' narrative strategy—the establishment of physical presence through camera being one of firmly locating the character within the viewer's identification process. To center her films on a marginalized people is a tricky prospect for

a white female—and there is room for many interpretations and misunderstandings between the intentions of the filmmaker and the eye of the beholder. It is always possible that for all of her carefully thought out considerations in the way she films Africans and blacks, the historical trappings that weigh on these relationships will forever shape what is possible from her position.

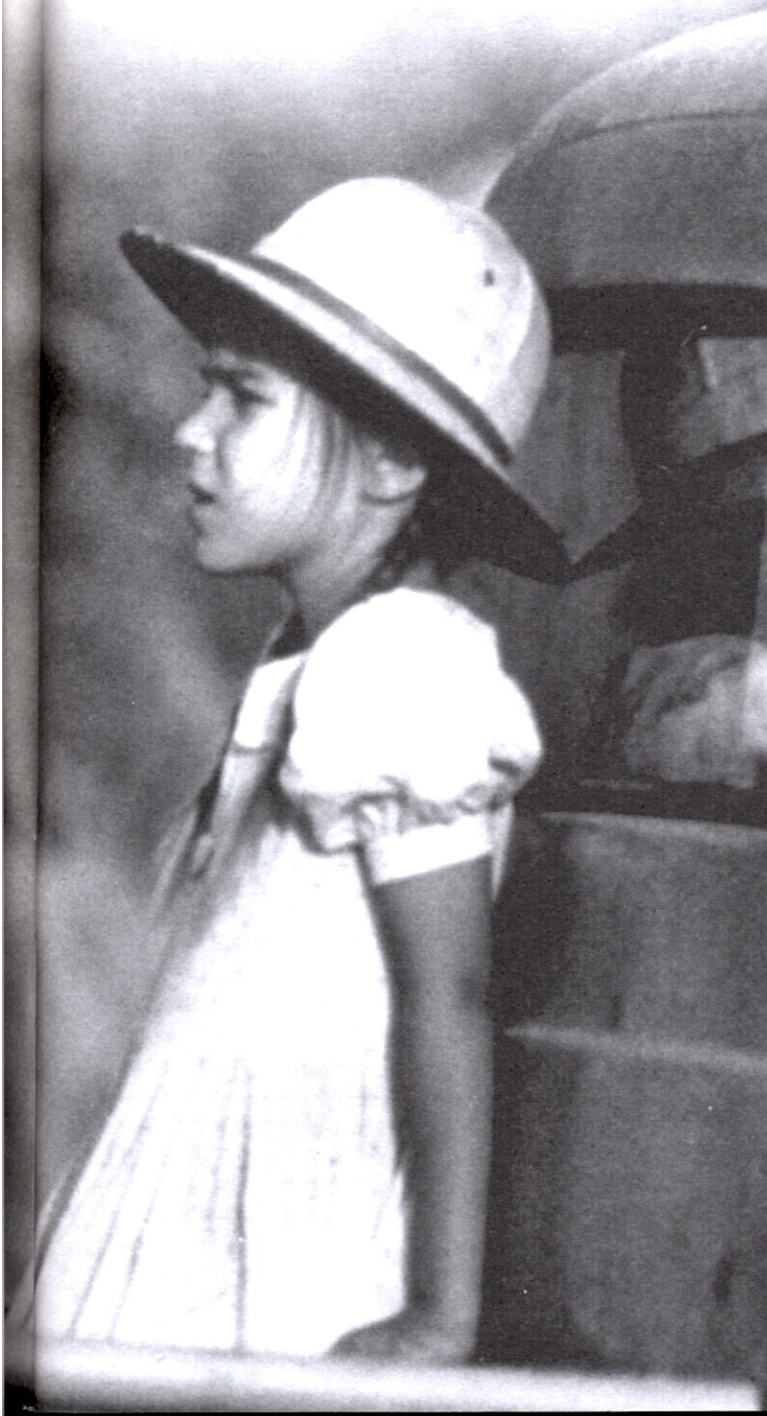
Amongst contemporary European filmmakers there is an increasingly visible tendency in the work of sensitive white liberals—a preoccupation with the portrayal of outsiders and immigrants in the country, and the legacy of colonialism. Apparent is the need to address the relationship with immigration in general, but also specifically with ex-colonial subjects in modern France, to evoke on film the contemporary, post-decolonization landscape, and the complex encounters between Africa and France. This impulse can be clearly seen in works such as *Code Inconnu*, *La Promesse*, and of course, *La Haine*. Within the white European's approach to the legacy of colonialism, what is often apparent is an obsession with the hideousness of this shadow of white society—perhaps guilt, but maybe even a morbid fascination with these more obvious, pointed examples of racism. This is sometimes not so much about the lived experience of the Other, about black people's lives, but is in some ways more about the white self, about the diseased portion of one's own society. Frequently these post-colonial films have a white hero as central character and "natives" serve as either unknowable Other, or as colourful backdrop.<sup>3</sup>

Denis reveals some of these tendencies, but she also pushes further into attempts to position the viewer more centrally, more directly within the black character's experience, deeper into an investment with their perspective. This is a complicated choice, a troubled position, given who she is—a problem of which she is clearly cognizant. In interviews she responds always in a sophisticated and thoughtful way to these concerns. If there are known limitations—she is still a white person with a specific, historically, culturally loaded position—clearly there is a relevance to modern life in examining these relationships nonetheless, in continuing to think about them. Particular to these three films, is a kind of restitution of a black male presence as a magnetic center.

About her motivation for making films, Jonathan Romney asked her, in relation to *S'en fout la mort*, "In that film particularly, but in many other films, you seem to be really interested in marginal worlds—people on the outskirts of society who are in a kind of underground. Is this part of a decision for you as a filmmaker...?". Denis answered:

...I always consider that to make a film—all that energy, all that money—was to put the camera in the direction of the people I want to see and not the people I watch on TV...I feel like obliged to go to people that should be seen, that should be in the light. Because they are interesting, not only because they have had the hard life. Because I think they are worth it, you know?<sup>4</sup>

Part of her challenge in this is to present these "interesting" characters without putting words in their mouths, words she as a white woman cannot really know.





This leads us to the aesthetics that are distinct in Denis—the lack of talkiness and the way the camera approaches the male image, the male body—a much more lingering, attentive, affectionate regard of the male than is usually seen. While this approach is seen in much of Denis' work—*Beau Travail* being perhaps the most extreme example—the three films in consideration here are also centred upon black men, a further rarity in cinematic representation.

While there is a sensuality suggested, an aestheticism generated by the female gaze observing beautiful men, this is also relevant within the demands of the various narratives, reflecting the fascinations and desires of other characters in these films.

While her secondary characters are often wordy, talkative chatterboxes, delivering some of the exposition of stories and situations, they also serve to convey a sense of the dialogue-loving culture within which her more laconic central characters move and live. The silence of Protée and France, Jocelyn, Camille and Daiga, is highlighted in contrast to the talkative secondary characters—the crowd who arrive in *Chocolat*, Ardennes in *S'en fout la mort*, aunt Ira and the hotel owner in *J'ai pas sommeil*.

The storytelling approach in these films—using minimal dialogue and a camera that lingers on gesture and nuance of expression to establish and evoke the laconic central characters—creates a charismatic and enigmatic center which we seek to know more about. Generally we know little or nothing about the main characters in any concrete way—we guess at their motivations, thoughts, feelings. This effort required from the viewer encourages a stronger connection with the character's experience—the creation of studied mystery around the characters leads to a curiosity and inquisitiveness vis-à-vis these characters' internal lives, and what is either outwardly visible or universal in their emotional response. Black people are allowed to exist without having words placed in their mouths, invoked instead by long holds on silent, inscrutable men, contemplating their mysteries, the equivocal expressions of their interior lives. The camera's lingering manner allows for a charisma through mysterious presence to evolve or reveal itself in a way that would not be possible if there were quick cutting or extensive dialogue. As they are silent, we watch them and imagine their thoughts, projecting a range of possible interior monologues, issues, on to them, in effect giving them a richness and complexity through their observed, enigmatic presence.

In this silence there is also a hint of the noble, stoic indigent type, as there is also a sense of the foregrounding of black male beauty. However, though there is unquestionable beauty in these men, and long slow cinematic contemplations of their physical selves—particularly in *Chocolat* and *J'ai pas sommeil*—this fact of their beauty also holds its place in the narrative, it is part of the story. The focus on the physicality of the person is relevant and deliberate, not merely a self-indulgence—these stories do have significant elements of attraction, fascination, and forbidden desire. All of these layers of the nature of the gaze are existing at the same time.

If we consider for a moment another filmmaker's comments on the effects of the camera fixating for a long time on characters, we can look to Norman Cohn, filmmaking partner of Zacharias Kunuk (*Atanarjuat, The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*). While he speaks of taking the observational camera to a much more exaggerated length, his thoughts hint at the profundity of

the difference possible in extended close observation. Cohn has said, "When we look at people, we normally do so for not more than about ten seconds at a time. What I realized was that if you look at someone for, say, half an hour, or an hour straight, something else starts to happen. It's illuminating. There's a radiance".<sup>5</sup> While Denis' shots are obviously much shorter than this, and remain within classic narrative function, there is a favouring of lengthy master shots, and a different use of the camera's capacity for observation, especially given the near-silence of many of her central characters. The hint of their interior lives is predicated on the close study of nuances in gesture and facial expression. Denis herself describes the choice of shooting style, of the long, uninterrupted master shots (*plan séquences*): "Le plan séquence pour moi, c'est le temps nécessaire pour qu'un rapport s'établisse avec un personnage...c'est le corps lui-même de l'acteur que développe la chorégraphie".<sup>6</sup>

### CHOCOLAT

Denis' first feature film is composed largely of a flashback to the 1950s, and French colonial presence in an African country. We observe the struggles to maintain a rigid power structure but within the context of the domestic sphere—the minutiae of this little world suggest the feminine eye behind it, and allow for all the absurdity of the relations to show themselves in small battles around the mundane details of a household, the sphere of woman, child, and "boy". It is a nostalgia and guilty conscience movie, more experiential and capturing an impression of a time, a way of life, than narrative driven. The filmmaking is elegant and simple, using only two lenses, long slow takes, occasional simple moves of the camera. And for the large part it is a very visual storytelling, understated, relying on few words.

Denis was raised more in Africa than in France, and this first film explores her own mixed feelings about her experience through the rendering of an unfortunate set of relations. Viewing the colonial adventure in retrospect, she is concerned with conscience and conscientiousness: "When I was making *Chocolat* I think that I had a desire to express a certain guilt I felt as a child raised in a colonial world....knowing I was white, I tried to be honest in admitting that *Chocolat* is essentially a white view of the 'other'".<sup>7</sup> Denis' clarity about the implications of the white view included the decision to not have scenes between blacks only, without whites present—she makes no pretense of being able to capture a black African exchange independent of white presence. Instead, the white view is entered through France, the adult woman (Mireille Perrier), who takes us back to France, the child (Cécile Ducasse), who introduces us to the world of her childhood, and specifically—enunciated through close-ups in the first ride in the truck—to Aimée (Giulia Boschi) and Protée (Isaach de Bankolé). France is our conduit into a perspective of whites watching blacks—she is able to traverse boundaries between white and black living spaces and relationships, guiding us into an encounter with Protée, and an African colonial experience.

There is an aura of complicity in the relationship between France, the child, and Protée, her caretaker—although he is an adult, he plays with her at a childish level, while also protecting her and serving her. Theirs is a relation of considerable tenderness and intimacy, in the sharing of food, riddles, and quiet moments—as if they are secreted away from the adults in their



own world. However, France's relationship with Protée—initially its own warm, trusting though sometimes complicated interaction—is dependent on the shifting state of the attraction and sexual tension between Protée and Aimée, culminating dramatically in his final cruel betrayal of little France's trust.

While we enter through the child, the film does not closely follow her point-of-view, and she is not actually present in all scenes. She is central, but in a sense she delivers us to Protée, the silent heart of the film, the "pivotal character".<sup>8</sup> With Protée's substantial role we see that Africans in this film are not simply colourful background, but rather that the film is attempting to directly address the encounter between black and white. France is our way in, but her role is more one of observer, and she does not reveal the complexity of her interior life the way Aimée and Protée do. As the adult drama develops, France's relationship with Protée changes, so as viewers we are taken beyond this child's viewpoint out to the adult world beyond. Of significance, France, the child, does not actually witness Protée's anguish in the two shower scenes—the first where he brings water for Aimée's shower, the second where he showers himself, crouched against the wall outdoors. These are clearly his scenes, entirely about his internal life, his frustrations and humiliations. France does not appear to be present when Luc (Jean-Claude Adelin) showers in the "boys'" shower. Nor is she visible through a) the climactic sequence of events around Luc's comment to Aimée that surely she would like to be in his place "pour frotter contre Protée"; b) Luc's fight with Protée, the two jealous rivals, that evening on the porch; c) or the silent approach and rejection between Aimée and Protée later in the darkened room.

Increasingly through these various scenes, we become firmly established in Protée's perspective, his angle of the story. His emotional life is not brought to bear by dialogue, but by the presence of his physical self, the camera's attention to him, his powerful understated performance within each scene. The camera's frequent proximity and clean low-angles give him considerable substance and weight. While this visual treatment of Protée does have a fetishizing element, contemplating him as an object of beauty, it can also be observed that the camera hangs on him with the purpose of establishing his person as the center of the film, the heart of the film. This non-verbal choice would appear to be a desire to avoid putting words in mouths, as Denis says, "...to show, without seeking to explain them (the blacks), without practicing an offensive 'psychologism', the real inhabitants of this African country".<sup>9</sup> This approach to Protée as a substantial character with a visibly complex if unspoken internal life, makes the scene of his final cruelty to the child, something we can comprehend from his point of view. We understand fully his longing, the mounting frustration, and his misplaced deliberate betrayal of the child all too well. It is not only the child who has our sympathy.

However, his considerable beauty and the conveying of this beauty is not insignificant, as within the story there is a strong sense of Aimée's gaze and France's gaze—they look at him, and we see him through their eyes. While he is beautiful for our eyes, more importantly, he is beautiful in Aimée's eyes—he is a sexual being, both desirable and desiring. This fact is the crux of the story. The camera both reveals and represents this white woman's lingering look at a desirable black male, and the affectionate look

of the child at one of her first significant close relationships.

The real story, the central story of the frustrated attraction between Protée and Aimée is conveyed almost entirely without dialogue (Luc's confrontation with Aimée on the subject being the exception)—the dynamic is all looks, gestures. The various scenes that make the problem clear rely largely on glance and subtle shifts in expression—the hyena scene, the doing up of the dress in front of the mirror, the two shower scenes. Even after the intense moment where Aimée and Protée look at each other in the mirror, the attraction undeniable, Aimée then dances with the Englishman, Boothby (Kenneth Cranham), outside, and although Protée stands far in the background, his presence is palpable, given the preceding scene. The strength of these nuances makes us always highly aware of his presence, his observations.

Within the spoken relationship, reinforcing the separations revealed visually between servants' space and master's space, is the way language is rendered faithfully as it would have been in these circumstances. Aimée addresses Protée as "tu" as he is the servant, while Protée addresses her as "vous" or "madame" as she is the master. This serves as a constant belittling reminder of the inequality of their relations. Both Boothby and Luc address Aimée as "vous" as she does them, reflecting the politeness of French address at the time, and of their status as adult males, raised above children and servants.

In contrast to Protée's silence, restraint and mystery, the crowd of French guests who arrive evoke all of the chattiness of French culture, and the insensitive thoughtlessness of people of privilege, giving them an absurdist, provocative role. These secondary characters provoke revelations, epiphanies and change. They deliver context and information, and can be seen digging their own graves with their offensive behaviour, embarrassing their hosts with their rudeness towards the locals. Luc's role as *agent provocateur* is a verbose addition to the film — his mischief and remarks expose the ugliness, the hypocrisies, all that lies hidden. His role is catalyzing as well as being insulting and offensive, to Protée in particular. It is significant that in such a relatively non-verbal film, one of the longer pieces of speech is Luc's reading from a book about the unnaturalness of white people—as illuminating angel, Luc is the natural one to deliver this thought. The quote appears to be a kind of Conradian diary excerpt. Protée's approach at that moment brings an awareness, a sentence that everyone in the scene then has of their situation together in Africa, a manifold self-consciousness. Protée's awkwardness as he approaches is inscrutable and compelling—though it is difficult to pinpoint what his thoughts might be, the possibilities are interesting to consider. The low angle medium close-up on him as he bends and listens begs the question: What is he thinking about? Is it the political tension between white and black? Is it the developing animosity between him and Luc? Is it that Luc's manner is overly intimate with Aimée?

Aside from the story of longing and forbidden desire that shapes the narration, the other subtext throughout the film is the stirrings of revolt, the movement towards independence from France — the men meeting in the school at night, the reference to a massacre of a household nearby, the original owner of their house having been reputedly killed by one of his houseboys. The possibility of violence to the French from the Africans is raised repeatedly, as if the country is continually



lurking on the verge of uprising and revolt, but again it is a force which is somewhat hidden underneath all the restraint and manners.

Back in the present again with the adult France, Mungo Park (Emmet Judson Williamson), the American who offers her a lift and who tells his story at the end, gives us another dimension to the African colonization trajectory, reminding us that race is not the only story. We have just witnessed a moment in history where colonial relations emphasized racialist divides, but Mungo's experience broadens the complexity of what ultimately separates people beyond simply skin colour, to include nationality, language and culture.

Finally, the last shot with the three workers at the airport in the post-colonial context is again a scene understood entirely through body language. Emphasized by the strength of the music, we watch the three contemporary African men at great length without comment, gathering simply an impression of their freedom of movement, a lack of constriction, a lack of oppression, a sense of self-determination.

### S'EN FOUT LA MORT

This second feature from 1990, represents a significant stylistic departure from the smooth control of *Chocolat*. The surface of the film appears rough and gritty—instead of the expansive landscapes and many wide shots of *Chocolat*, these settings are crowded, close, confined, the camera close to the actors, often dirty, over the shoulder, shaky and hand held in a cramped corner. The exteriors show an outskirts-of-the-city landscape of highways and overpasses, and have a blue non-adjusted light. The interiors consist of low doorways, winding grimy corridors and underground rooms. Again the body is rendered in space, albeit squeezed into this chaotic, claustrophobic terrain. The dismal mise-en-scène conveys the sensation that, “blacks only enter the realm of the white man as stowaways”.<sup>10</sup>

Dah's opening words, “Je suis noir et mon ami est la même couleur”, alert us to the element of the buddy movie, one whose adventures exist in a dark underworld of French society.

Given that we see Dah (Isaach de Bankolé) as he says this, the redundancy of image and voice emphasizes the first person experience—introducing us to an unspoken but physically portrayed bond of friendship. The two large close-ups of the men driving in the night throughout the credit sequence immediately conveys their bond. Dah speaks—his voice over narration is direct, in the present, introducing us to his world. He is not self-investigative—his commentaries are basic introductions, the matter of fact tone of a rough, essentially hurried life.

The function of the camera and its regard of the actors has changed enormously from that seen in *Chocolat*, reflecting the very different nature of this narrative. Here, Isaach de Bankolé is not played for his beauty—the camera is not steady enough, the lighting does not highlight details, the mise-en-scène is a chaotic scramble of dark underground pathways and small crowded rooms, offering a deliberately clumsy proximity to the characters that is not focused on the capturing of beauty. In fact, we do not so much look at Dah as see through him—from his perspective we watch Jocelyn's rapport with the birds, his withdrawn character creating a kind of negative centre. Dah's voice offers an open door into his world, and through him we again watch the silent tragic center, his friend, Jocelyn (Alex

Descas). Jocelyn we watch to see what he will do—he is the mysterious curiosity at the center, the intense young man with the Malcolm-X glasses. However he is not a forcefully charismatic character as is Protée in *Chocolat*, in part because of the looseness of the camera, in part due to his body language using a more collapsed posture, physically evoking the closed nature of his future.

Both of the men are fringe characters, each of them linked to musical themes. Both musical tracks—Dah's theme being Bob Marley's *Buffalo Soldier*, Jocelyn's theme the more anguished, busy urban hip-hop tape—represent black male pride / resistance / cultural strength. To some extent the music stands in for character, suggesting an interior life without requiring exposition. The bond between them is visible but largely closed to us, and the minimal moments of the quiet playful affection between them occasionally lift the weight of the oppressiveness of their circumstances. The brotherhood between them, and their tender caretaking of the roosters, makes them momentarily more sympathetic and accessible. Dah is the money-man, the negotiator, and so has something of a tough exterior, while Jocelyn is not personable or even particularly likable. There is a sullen severity to him which promises disaster. He does show a gentle devotion to the birds, and in a rare vocal moment, quietly reminisces about his grandfather's roosters, conjuring up an image of Jocelyn the child back in Martinique, far away from the land of the colonizers, where the authentic experience of cockfighting was lived out passionately.

We watch them negotiate their dismal, sordid environments on the outskirts of Paris, and the troubled relationship with their employer, Ardennes (Jean-Claude Brial). Ardennes here is the *agent provocateur*—he exists to chatter and offend, to manipulate, control and exploit. He haggles over every detail, insists that they enter through the back entrance, and has an implicit ownership over the women in the film. His previous relationship with Jocelyn's mother back in Martinique is referred to repeatedly, as deliberate torment to Jocelyn—Ardennes talking too much, too insistently, too provocatively about the beauty and nature of Jocelyn's mother. His wife Toni (Solweig Dommartin) becomes an object of fascination and undoing for the men, though she, herself, is peripheral. Toni is more symbol of transgression, of inaccessibility, of that which belongs to Ardennes, than she is a real character.

With these two female references, Jocelyn is powerless to either defend his own private past with his mother, or partake in a relation with Toni—the one, in effect, displacing the other. These pivotal issues of love and power become combined with the increase in violence to the roosters, heightening Jocelyn's sullen frustration and rage. With Ardennes' reference to his relation with Jocelyn's mother, he is able to reach deep into Jocelyn's personal life and pull his heart out. It is as if he lays claim to ownership even over Jocelyn—if he wasn't so black, he could be a son—both hinting at a position of paternal authority in Jocelyn's life and at once rejecting him. After this scene, Jocelyn wants to leave immediately, clearly sensing this cannot, will not end well.

The main body of the film, the content, is cockfighting—a world suggesting contraband and the trafficking of live beings, a poor man's underworld sport, evoking the colonial past, a whiff of the previous period of slavery. Speaking to the history of cockfighting as sport in colonial times, Denis says, “... the



slaves were not authorized to fight because if they fight they might injure themselves and therefore would not be able to work in the fields in the morning. So the cock fight was also a symbol of their own violence...".<sup>11</sup> The grimy underworld of *S'en fout la mort* is full of the violence and death of the roosters, and yet it is also full of a nurturing tenderness in their caretaking. The twisted turn this tenderness takes in Jocelyn's descent, drunk on the floor rubbing himself sexually with one of the roosters, is a striking image conveying the deep ache at the centre of this film—a dark and despairing evocation of contemporary black immigrant experience in France.

His final demise is both heartbreaking and inevitable, as Denis says: "I was all the time thinking of ... this death which is expected, which brings relief but is also painful".<sup>12</sup> The agonizing ambivalence of this experience we feel also through Dah, as we have entered this story through him. From within this entry point into the film, we live out a moment in time, a job, a friend who passed away. There is no pointed revelation, no social commentary or larger frame of reference—simply, this world exists, is presented as is, without further comment or apologies. We witness it and move on, on the highway once again.

#### J'AI PAS SOMMEIL

Denis' third feature, while returning to the city for environment, again maintains a fairly smooth, controlled surface, rendering a Paris that is not so gritty as in *S'en fout la mort*, yet is threatening in mysterious ways. The ensemble nature of the piece broadens the scope to this urban landscape and the many unpleasantnesses and violence it hides. If the theme of the film is societal breakdown and lack of security in modern big city life, it is not rendered in suspense or sensationalism, but in a cool observation of the state of affairs, and the quiet actions of the characters. If the film is about this overwhelming, dangerous, big city, fear is built in part by not understanding all that is going on. A lot is left unexplained, giving a narrative insecurity that helps destabilize, underlining the fact that we don't know so many things about what goes on—tears, violence, love and unhappiness are evident but are witnessed without elucidation.

The various threads of the different characters we meet introduce us to this place full of strangers from all over—the strangers are the neighbours next door, strangers are the dead upstairs on the eighth floor, strangers are your brother of whose deeds you are wholly ignorant.

With all of these mysterious goings-on, we are most frequently left to create our own back stories—repeatedly, scenes will suggest a situation, a problem, and we must guess at what may be going on. Specifically, during the scenes with Camille and boyfriend and / or Doctor, we surmise from the arguments, the embraces, the packed bags, what must most likely be happening within this love triangle. Similarly with Theo's neighbour—we are never sure exactly what is going on between the couple in the neighbouring apartment—is it abuse? is it elaborate sexual play?—we don't know, no matter how much we might speculate, a feature common enough in big city life.

The story begins with Daiga (Katerina Golubeva) driving into the city—again, the foreign white female as outsider coming in leading us to the central story. Denis has said of the use of this female character: "It seemed essential to me, because I

did not want to use the old woman's killer ... as the thread we follow. I wanted us to discover him, as we do when we open a newspaper and discover a foreign universe... and I saw a foreign woman arrive and enter this Paris which arouses fear".<sup>13</sup> Daiga is a strange young woman—rude and impulsive, but funny and compelling in her beautiful, sullen silence. However, she is not the center, but more a representation of our own curiosity, a thread following and observing Camille in the hotel. Camille (Richard Courcet) is aggressive yet charming, caring but intimidating, violent but with a laidback easy human rapport. He is classically enigmatic—more mysterious than knowable, sexy in his cultivated mysteriousness. Humour and context and a certain amount of expository dialogue are offered by the secondary characters such as the hotel owner (Line Renaud), Aunt Ira (Irina Grejbina), and Mona (Beatrice Dalle). They fill in some of the gaps necessary to put the narrative pieces together, and again provide a point of contrast to the more laconic central characters.

Early on, the camera's long view on Camille as he lies on the bed with his painted nails, POV of the child, and then lingering as he dresses in the bathroom revealing his fishnet stockings, while allowing us to observe these details, also seems to function as a kind of visceral proximity, an exaggeration of the betrayal of intimacy in a very banal private moment. The camera's strange closeness and lengthy immodest observation suggest and arouse a natural curiosity—Who is this person? Why is this man in fishnets and what is he doing in this bathroom? The performance is neutral, always understated, never given to dramatics, but his physical being is so foregrounded, that we wait to see what will emerge from him.

Similarly, his drag performance some forty minutes into the film is a slow, almost boring and yet fascinating moment, where we do little besides watch him and contemplate his beauty and charismatic mystery. His dance and dress are effeminate, pretty and vulnerable with no shoes and his dress falling down—he evokes none of the clowning of drag, there are no fake boobs or exaggerated makeup, only the beguiling melancholic connotation of the female as sought-after object. The unusualness of all these elements, the camera's long roving over the details of his body, and the duration of the performance through an entire song make him unquestionably the central, enigmatic, inscrutable star. This magnetic display of him as sexy, beautiful, desirable, is key to the ambivalence of his character—we want to know him, we understand how charming he appears to be, so there is a curiosity aroused, based far from the monstrous criminal side he reveals later in the film.

Camille's brother, Théo (Alex Descas), in some ways shares the center of the film—this weight of his is not based on the same kind of attention from the camera, but on the authority of his morality, his caring parenting, his concern for his neighbour, his loyalty to his family. We know only a few things of Théo, yet we are presented clearly with his longing to leave the city—to return to the homeland, to Eden—to leave the land of the colonizers, the psychotic city. Again this Descas character has a kind of inward energy, somewhat sullen, but who provides us with an obviously decent soul in the midst of the various amoral or self-interested activities of some of the other characters. Not that the film is ever moralizing—on the contrary, there is an openness, a lack of conclusiveness about the characters, a lack of sensation to the criminality and complex



sexual relations woven through with all of their mundane and comic elements. Between the two brothers there is a balance or a dualism in their roles—a kind of implicit Cain and Abel dynamic. In terms of the strategy of the script, it is also possible to understand Théo's presence as a "good" black male presence in the film, helping deflect any racially-based assumptions.

Both brothers barely register inflection in their expressions—nothing really reveals an interior—they are exteriors, they are their actions, with little indicating the nature of their interior lives. They sleep on opposite sides of a wall, share a bathroom, and even early on there is a cut from a shot of one brother, Camille, walking along the street, which then cuts directly to Théo, in precisely the same walking posture, suggesting a similarity, a parallel, a connection, a simultaneity. Throughout the scene of the birthday party, they are both attentive sons, awkward, tense and funny with each other, though not with mother. As the scene is only dance, body language and facial expression, no dialogue, one wonders if there is rivalry between them? Playful discomfort? Both appear to be doting sons, but they avoid getting too close to each other.

One of the key scenes between them occurs when Camille comes to the apartment to speak to Théo just after we have seen him in a hospital waiting room. We assume Camille is sick, but there is an awkward moment in the doorway, and Camille leaves, having said nothing. When Théo follows him to the Metro, the lack of communication continues, Camille boards a train, and they part, each seen in close-up, looking troubled, disappointed, sad. Here again, the function of the silently observing camera builds its own momentum with characters, its own approach to psychology. The minimal verbal exchange between the characters makes the tiniest gesture, glance, or brief moment become one loaded with dramatic weight. This is as true of the various shifts in ambivalent feeling between the brothers as it is in the moment where Daiga and Camille actually speak, briefly, barely, in the café. The parallel movement between their stories since the beginning of the film suggests an inevitable meeting, and Daiga's constant observing of Camille hints at the possibility of erotic fascination on her part, so we are primed for some kind of revelation when their paths finally cross. The minutiae of the specifics of this meeting do not diminish its impact. As Judith Mayne has observed: "...the film has so patiently watched these two, and in particular has watched Daiga watch Camille, that when this moment arrives, it is both poignant and momentous".<sup>14</sup>

With Camille's arrest, still it is not words that deliver much insight. Camille, the film's central enigma, addresses his captors, the camera, in a small speech, saying only, "Je suis un type facile", suggesting it is the world in general, "les choses", that makes things go wrong. The nothingness of these statements, the lack of any helpful explanation leads us to the next scene, where, in some of the last moments of the film, the brothers pass in the hallway of the police station. They look at each other, heads cocked, and say nothing. They are silent strangers.

Each of these early Denis films is engaged with black, male characters in central roles, a choice loaded with political issues of who is looking at whom, of the gaze and its problematics. We can see how her tactics, while always highly cinematic, evolve and shift, or are approached somewhat differently with each

project, the stylistics depending on their relevance to the story. Throughout, we can understand Denis' point of identification or reference as a kind of outsider/insider ambivalence. Each of these films deals with foreigners in strange lands, each film opens and closes with traveling sequences of people arriving into and departing from the place where the film unfolds. Denis herself has admitted, "If my films have a common link, maybe it's being a foreigner...".<sup>15</sup>

With *Chocolat*, Denis begins her career with a film apparently motivated by white guilt, a story of the oppression of blacks by whites—entering via a white child to allow an observation of the relationships between black and white, in terms of power and sexuality. But immediately she has begun a cinematic approach to the human figure as able to evoke its own stories and mysteries. Her next feature, *S'en fout la mort*, does away with the white person's primary footing, and plunges into a first person account of black male exile. Jocelyn and Dah are clearly the colonized adrift in the colonizing country, without homes, jobs, negotiating an underworld on the edges of society. Filmically, the image reflects this rough, scrabbly existence, and the witnessing of Jocelyn's descent suggests a mix of pathos, tragedy, and waste. *J'ai pas sommeil* offers the most complicated central character, the amoral Camille—a likable, soft-spoken serial killer, a loving son who murders old ladies. Here we see a highly attentive, lingering camera that quietly allows him to show us the range of his contradictions.

The focus on men throughout the body of Claire Denis' work, the salience of male beauty, and the complexity of sexual relations, is a highly distinctive part of her filmmaking style. The strategy through all these films can be seen to be a carefully considered cinematic address to socio-political conundrums, in terms of characters, the situations depicted, the use of the camera, and consistently, of silence.

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#### Notes

- 1 Diana Holmes & Robert Ingram from the "Series Editor Foreword" in Martine Beugnet's *Claire Denis*, French Film Directors, Manchester University Press, 2004, vii.
- 2 Denis quoted in Judith Mayne's *Claire Denis*, Contemporary Film Directors, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005, 25.
- 3 Beugnet offers a very full discussion of Otherness in Denis' films, pg 12.
- 4 As quoted by Jonathan Romney in "The Guardian/NFT interview: Claire Denis interviewed by Jonathan Romney", Wednesday June 28, 2000. [film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,338784,00.htm](http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,338784,00.htm). Date accessed: 3 October 2006.
- 5 Norman Cohn quoted in "Kunuk's Silent Partner" by Sarah Milroy, *Globe and Mail*, Wednesday September 6, 2006: R1 - R2.
- 6 Denis in Beugnet, 40.
- 7 Denis in Mayne, 36 - 37.
- 8 Attributed to Denis in Susan Hayward's "Reading masculinities in Claire Denis's *Chocolat*", *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 1.2 (2002b), 120 - 127.
- 9 Denis in Hayward, 122.
- 10 Beugnet, 71.
- 11 Denis in Romney.
- 12 Denis quoted by Aimé Ancian in "Claire Denis: An Interview". Translation by Inge Pruks. *Senses of Cinema* 23. Nov - Dec 2002. [www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/23/denis\\_interview.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/23/denis_interview.html) Date accessed: 3 October 2006.
- 13 Denis in Ancian.
- 14 Mayne, xi.
- 15 Denis in Romney.



# Fellini's Forgotten Masterpiece

## TOBY DAMMIT

GEORGE PORCARI

Fellini's *Toby Dammit*, a forty minute film made in 1968, is one of three short films adapted from stories by Edgar Allan Poe that were distributed together in Italy as *Tre Passi Nel Delirio*, in France as *Histoires Extraordinaires*, and in England and the U.S. as *Spirits of the Dead*. The other two short films are *William Wilson* and *Metzengerstein* adapted by Louis Malle and Roger Vadim respectively. Fellini's film is an adaptation set in contemporary Rome of Poe's *Never Bet the Devil Your Head* published in 1841. Poe's work is a brief comic satire of the transcendentalist movements that were then popular in Europe and America. Fellini's work takes two elements from Poe's story: First the plot of a drunk who confronts a mysterious stranger on a bridge and bets him his head; the man fails to see that the stranger is the devil who subsequently wins the bet. Second Fellini takes the name Toby Dammit, Toby being an English slang term for ass in Poe's time.<sup>1</sup> In short *Toby Dammit* is a dammed ass.

The film begins with a sudden shift from day to night. The opening hand held shot is of a romantic late afternoon sky that then abruptly cuts to a static night shot of the interior of a jet's cockpit. The only color in the following shot, and almost all subsequent shots for the next six minutes, will be monochrome, using red, yellow, blue and orange filters. On the soundtrack the sound of a jet is too prominent for an interior shot. In the plane's cockpit we see the landing lights of an airport at night directly behind the windshield as in a flight simulator. We hear the voice of Toby Dammit, a British actor played by Terence Stamp before we see him—his voice is decadent, laconic, resigned, exhausted:

*The plane grew closer and closer to Rome. I knew she would be there waiting for me with her white ball.*

The landing lights of the airport recede mechanically into blackness. We sense the forced simulation of motion that these devices are meant to convey rather than any sense of actual speed. There is a sudden cut to a series of shots, some documentary and some created in the studio, that show the interior of an airport. Each is shot using different color filters and different camera movements that in the editing do not match—and it is clear that this is done intentionally—but to what end? We seem to have only fragments of scenes—nothing is complete. There are abrupt shifts in visual syntax using a variety of cinematic techniques that refuse to cohere, that in fact contradict each other, as if incompleteness itself were the key factor in organizing the film's narration. For example a brief shot of a black woman who acknowledges the camera as it moves past her seems to be filmed using a conventional documentary form.



Terence Stamp in *Toby Dammit*

That is, she is forced to step back to let the camera past her, the background action is a real airport, and it is shot at eye level. But rather than the familiar hand held motions that would typically accompany such a shot Fellini uses a smooth dolly on tracks, which glides through the space, throwing into doubt the sense that it is a documentary shot. Throughout the film one cinematic convention cancels the effects of another by making the illusion it seeks to create null and void. In *Toby Dammit* the encyclopedic technical devices, the rapid shifts in cinematic convention and the self consciously awkward camerawork and editing suggest that there are a multiplicity of realities in unresolved conflict. The density of information each short scene contains makes it difficult to see where the scene will go from second to second. There seems to be a resistance on the part of

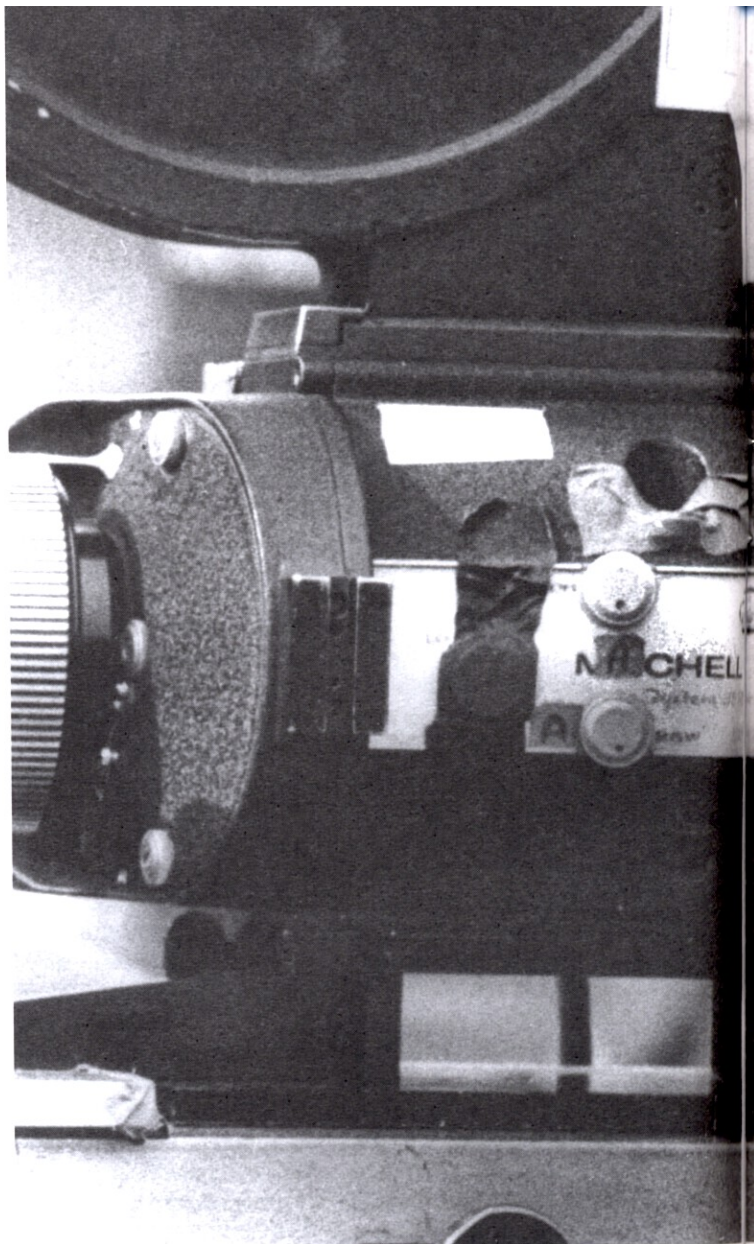


this opening sequence to narration itself. Fellini seems to have sought every possible stylistic convention available to him, yet meaning always seems consciously mediated by a cinematic technique that is inappropriate to the content. His deployment of oblique framings, complex intersecting planes and ambiguous reflections reinforce and make very clear that we are seeing a highly conscious visual strategy. Every time a scene is on the verge of clarification, or a resolving moment seems about to occur it is frustrated by a cut.

At Rome's Leonardo Da Vinci Airport the full color spectrum returns as Toby Dammit stumbles onto a bunch of flowers, suggesting both a wreath and a bouquet. Toby's face is ashen, his matted hair is bleached blonde and he walks forward uncertainly as if afraid to fall. Strobe lights flash from paparazzi as they run for Toby who escapes to the top a nearby escalator—strangely the paparazzi do not follow. Toby steps off into a mezzanine alone where he mimes the gesture of taking someone by the hand. He asks with gravity to no one:

*Why did you come here?*

In conventional Hollywood films such as *The Cell* the multiplicity of contradictory styles, the purposely exotic imagery and the manic shifts in tone are meant to be interpreted as mimicking a mind in the process of disintegration—that is—one that is no longer able to distinguish between perception, memory and imagination. The collage effects aesthetically represent the essence of this confusion and allow us to understand its cause if we examine the meaning (usually Freudian) of the images. In a more complex work such as Bergman's *Persona* the same is true but the relation of "normal" to "sick" is consciously thrown into doubt because Bergman asks questions regarding the nature of identity rather than illustrating "madness". In conventional Hollywood films the past determines the present and the future in a systematic way. That is something that is foreign to Fellini; his sense of delight in the chaos of the present moment allows at least for the possibility of something new and unforeseen to occur that is not historically determined. For Fellini collage effects do not mimic the mind only, but rather the friction between the mind and a physical reality that resists summarizing truths. Within a single image we find essentialist metaphors (such as a flock of sheep in a cul-de-sac) which direct our attention to symbolic motifs, yet these elements constitute only part of the content of the image. These metaphors are forced to exist in a reality that is overfull of visual information, interruptions, delays; a world of complexity and randomness that remains unresolved and without essential meaning. These fragmented partial views consist of unfinished actions and uncertain conclusions. The narrative that they embody is episodic, not as in Bergman, tragic. In Fellini we experience a world of faces, voices, gestures, all moving in and out of the frame, all with their own unique characteristics. There seems to be no place in such a world for essences but only for the temporal confusion and the spatial mess of provisional truths. The confusion and the mess are in fact what the film is partially about. From realist filmmakers such as Roberto Rossellini and Victoria DeSica Fellini learned what Martin Scorsese insightfully refers to as a "Franciscan" respect for the world of physical reality. Realists as different in temperament as Jean Renoir and John Cassavetes have tremendous respect, first, for the world of



the senses, of the body, of expression, of action; and secondly, for the social context that a particular individual is in. But Fellini is not a realist—rather he delays our essentialist reading of his work by using realism and he does the same to a realist reading by using luscious symbolic references and theatrically comic digressions often within the same frame. In short what we have here is a cinema of paradox.

In an alcoholic stupor Toby Dammit rides in a limousine taking him from the airport to Rome; he sits between a priest, who is the producer of the film Toby will make and a woman who is his translator who explains the film he is to make in a humorously monotone voice:

*This is to be the first Catholic Western. Man is given another chance at redemption as Christ comes back to earth as a cowboy. It will be done with the minimum of sets and shot like Pasolini...*

Toby lurches toward the producer not having heard a word and asks:





*Where's the Ferrari the production office promised me?*

Toby's role as Christ in this intended Catholic Western (where Pasolini will be reduced to a style in the manner of advertising) is playfully subverted by having Toby's only interest in the proceedings be a car. The central motifs of the Western: violence, men and landscapes; the struggle of man against nature, of good against evil, of civilization against anarchy, all play themselves out in the film we see but not as it was conceived by the priest/producer. This is an inspired doubling of roles for he is both the intermediary between man, God and the financing of the film. His power is tangible—he rides in limousines—yet Fellini goes to great lengths to show us this man as a modern buffoon, as well fed and self-obsessed as any rock star. His enthusiastic gestures as he pontificates about the film, the sweat running down his chubby face, his arrogant earthy laughter, all comically undermine any possibility for transcendence which is presumably the point of his profession, and the theme of the Catholic Western they are to make. As in so much of Fellini's work the face is more eloquent than the words that come from it, betraying the delusions of the speaker by allow-

ing us to see what lies underneath the effects and the facade. For example Zampano's macho posing as a self-contained and freedom loving gypsy in *La Strada* is betrayed by a face that is uncertain, hurt and lost. Gelsomina, his partner, enjoys posing as a worldly artiste to small town workers, but unlike Zampano she does not take the posing seriously. Fellini superbly conveys this delicate balance between shifting identities, between interior and exterior, often to create an extraordinary sense of the comic and the tragic simultaneously.

Another abrupt cut takes us to the interior of a television studio where the canned reactions of a simulated audience are controlled by a television director. Toby sits uneasily between a massive black and white photographic collage of himself that serves as a backdrop and the television camera, which hydraulically glides around the room with a comically sovereign power. The pixie announcer crawls along the floor on all fours, by Toby's feet, out of camera range. Arriving at her proper place she begins to contort her face wildly in order to exercise her facial muscles before going on camera. On cue (an applause track) she announces Toby to the simulated audience as a great Shakespearean actor. She asks him:



*Do you believe in God?*

*No.*

*And in the devil?*

*In the devil yes.*

*Can you tell us what he looks like?*

We cut to a simultaneous track and zoom, which occur at different rhythms creating a very awkward movement, of a little girl holding a white ball. The soundtrack is turned off, isolating this image from the rest of the film. Her face is theatrically painted with white make-up and there is a very bright spotlight that shines directly on her eyes making them appear bloodshot. She wears lipstick and her face suggests an adult sense of corruption. Her meticulous Victorian clothes come from Poe's time and suggest the duality of innocence and madness that is found in the Gothic sensibility of that time. Her make-up and the malevolent expression on her face come from the iconography of Romantic painting depicting evil incarnate in human form: Fuseli, Bocklin and Goya all have done versions of malevolence and death personified by a specter. Because of the intense light and the seamless background it is clear that she is in a studio interior, yet in the following medium shot we see that she is standing in the lobby of the airport we saw earlier—now strangely deserted. The white ball bounces the wrong way on the escalator in slow motion. At the top of the escalator, as in the beginning of the film, is Toby shot from below through an orange filter. We see him bowing to her in acknowledgment, the bow of a Restoration dandy—it is a formal gesture of greeting a familiar nemesis.

*To me she looks like a little girl.*

There is simulated laughter and applause. Toby turns his back to the television camera and the photographic collage of him has been removed to reveal the stage for a commercial. It is the set of a modern kitchen where there is a model wearing an apron and holding a mop as if to clean a perfectly polished floor. Nino Rota brilliantly mimics the banal happy music of a commercial as she turns her head mechanically towards Toby who whispers to her:

*Will you marry me?*

There is a reaction close-up of the model who is now a mannequin that begins to rotate in place anticipating the doll in *Casanova*. The sexualized doll was first seen as a subject of fiction in *The Sandman* written by Poe's contemporary E.T.A. Hoffman. This short story features a female automaton that sometime later became Freud's first example of "the uncanny", which he defined as "the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light". In the 1920's *The Sandman* inspired various filmmakers, writers and artists to deal with that aspect of the story that centers on the mechanized sexuality of the automaton. This was a way to articulate the dysfunctional sexuality that seemed contiguous to the speed and corruption of contemporary metropolitan life. Among the most brilliant examples are Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and George Grosz's drawings of prostitutes as mechanized dolls. Surrealist artists and writers were also influenced in the 1930's, when the mannequin (suggestively dressed and posed to presumably shock the middle

classes) became a required motif in Surrealist expositions. Of more lasting interest are Andre Breton's *Nadja*, and Hans Bellmer's tinted black and white photographs of doll parts in various poses suggesting a macabre sexuality.

"I want to make order—I want to clean." says Claudia in *8 1/2*. In *Toby Dammit*, six years after that film, this domestic sensibility has a different meaning. It is as if Fellini wished to perform a taxidermy on the previous character and place it in a television studio to sell soap, to show this image debased and corrupt, but with its archetypal power still mysterious and intact. So much so that Toby asks the mannequin to marry him. His ironic smile tells us that Toby is fully aware of his absurdly rhetorical question. It is at that point that he turns away from both women, the television announcer in front of him and the mannequin behind him, and whispers the most significant line in the film to himself:

*What a waste!*

The awards' ceremony that follows is held in an artificial cavern that seems to serve as a night-club, a fashion runway, and a theater. Toby is led to a waiting area and made to sit; when he asks for a drink he is told "no" with a disapproving parental shrug. Toby is treated as if he were a child throughout the film because despite Toby's associations with drinking, speed and abandon he is essentially a passive character. He slouches like a bored adolescent in the limousine while the realities of the city pass before him; he sits in the television station answering questions like a spoiled child, at one point sticking his tongue out at his interviewer; he passes the award's ceremony in an alcoholic haze, sleeping in his chair. Toby Dammit's character is further revealed in T.S. Eliot's study of Poe that defines him as "irresponsible and immature...with the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty. All of his ideas seem to be entertained rather than believed."<sup>2</sup> As Ray Charles' *Ruby* plays on the soundtrack a beautiful woman comes and sits at Toby's side whispering:

*I am the one you have always been waiting for...we shall have a perfect life together...you will never be alone again.*

The band strikes up an uplifting introduction number as a harsh white spotlight finds Toby slumped sleeping in his chair, suggesting that the woman was a dream. He gets up and forces a grotesque smile to the cameras and the fans as he stumbles to the stage. An announcer announces:

*Toby Dammit! Not only a great star but a great actor!*

Everyone kisses him to bits. From loud applause there is absolute silence suggesting the audience is simulated, yet we see them, silhouetted figures in the midst of smoke that seems to hang in the air. Toby recites from *Macbeth*:

*A poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury...*

He begins to babble clutching the microphone stand for support, significantly forgetting the end of the line: "signifying



nothing." Toby runs from the smoky award ceremony to the foggy street as a mysterious figure appears with the keys to a gold Ferrari. Toby jumps into the topless car and drives off madly into the night. The streets of Rome become a labyrinth—one of Dante's rings—blurred by speed and Toby, exhilarated by it, comes to resemble the middle aged Poe. As the lights reflected on the narrow windshield spin by the car bounces in place like a toy, and Toby's flying hair and furious shifting become a comedy of simulated forward movement. There is a similar shot in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* where the point of view shot from the car turns the frame into a tunnel, into which one point perspective seems to recede endlessly into a Futurist dream of speed, power and freedom. But unlike Kubrick's film—which openly delights in the fantasy—this dream is shown to be a simulacrum. The shots of the car are obviously stationary because, despite the wind effects and the street-lights flashing by on the windshield, the overall lighting remains static and consistent. Another way that we notice that the car is not moving is that the relationship of the camera and the car is highly elaborate and precise: The camera delicately pans the metallic surface of the Ferrari, gliding over its small curved windshield. It is as if one machine (the camera) were lovingly playing with another (the car) in a macabre dance. Once again Fellini evokes a cinematic convention (the freedom of speed and the open road) and proceeds to negate it at the same time.

As Toby drives around a fountain in the middle of a square the car's headlights illuminate a cardboard dog. Fellini shows much of the "reality" which Toby encounters, including people, to be props. Near a restaurant a waiter stands as if paralyzed with fear on the edge of the sidewalk. In a long shot we then see the Ferrari hit a mannequin dressed as the waiter and speed off. Like the actress in the cleaning commercial transformed into a mannequin, the waiter becomes a life size cut-out. The fact that Toby wants to "marry" the first and that he "kills" the second is significant. Unlike Toby, who is privileged, both the housewife and the waiter are subservient figures and Toby is shown in close-up looking at them before their transformation. These close-ups strongly suggest that the metamorphosis from human to mannequins and cardboard cut-out that people and animals undergo is a product of Toby's imagination. Through Toby's point of view we repeatedly see adults as grotesque caricatures driven by vanity, stupidity and greed. We are made to feel that these point-of-view shots are an honest assessment of the contemporary world, not despite the theatrical distortions, but because of them, for it is only then that we are able to see what lies underneath the surface of reality. Fellini in a sense has it both ways. Toby's erratic point-of-view is treated as both an alcoholic withdrawal from a reality that is out of control, and as a justified indictment of a society that is spectacularly ridiculous when we see what it prizes. Fellini started his career as a caricaturist and he uses that talent with a scathing directness that can be seen as a comic moral critique along the lines of Petronius, Rabelais and Cervantes.

The crash comes against a barricade of oil drums and construction equipment. There is a shot of a tire spinning that is self-consciously awkward, accomplished as before, by zooming and tracking at different rhythms. Toby gets out of the car and starts to walk down a modern highway in the middle of a deserted landscape as Nino Rota's music abruptly stops. There is a fog and behind the fog there are only trees and mountains.

Toby kicks an empty oil drum that rolls into the chasm. After a few seconds we hear a very distant crash at which point there is a close-up of Toby smiling. He looks up and sees the collapsed bridge between layers of fog, and on the other side of the abyss he sees the little girl dancing with her white ball. He shouts:

*I'm going to get across!*

Toby backs the car up to build up speed and with a mad laugh he screams off. We lose the car in the fog but there is no sound of a crash. As the camera glides to the other side of the chasm a white ball bounces in slow motion into the frame. The little girl catches the ball and picks up Toby's decapitated head from the ground. She smiles into the camera as Nino Rota's music returns to the soundtrack. We see the highway and the collapsed bridge at dawn as the street-lights that recede into the horizon are turned off (an inversion of Antonioni's *The Eclipse*).

*Toby Dammit* reverses the Christ story by having Toby visited by the devil who beckons him, literally from across a divide, into entering a space that is prohibited to men. What is this space? He drives his Ferrari headlong into an abyss, yet the depth of this abyss is an imaginary space since we never actually see it. It remains shrouded in darkness and fog, a space without boundaries; its incommensurability expressing the impossibility of apprehending all with the eye or of controlling all with the intellect. This "fall" is a version, at once Christian and Modern, of the mystery of original sin. The vertigo this space creates is not caused by a fear of falling to a finite point that is fatal, but rather of falling interminably into an endless void. That is why, despite the fact that we hear the oil drum crash after a few seconds, we never hear the sound of the car crashing; it never finishes falling because the cosmic and the psychic collapse into this void, an "event horizon". This abyss disappears literally into Nature; a Nature that remains enigmatic, dangerous and ultimately unknowable. Hitchcock understood this impasse and linked it to memory and desire in *Vertigo*. Fellini links it precisely to the mysteries of nature which we cannot grasp by reversing the "leap of faith" so crucial to the Catholic imagination from Pascal to Kierkegaard and making it literal. Toby puts himself in the absurd position of having to use technology at its most sophisticated at that moment (a Ferrari) to attempt that "leap". Yet this leap of faith is the negative of faith; it is faith with a modern face: It is ironic, self-conscious, arrogant, contemptuous, and self-loathing. The sudden and unexplained shift from day to night at the beginning of the film is our entrance into this space and the return to daylight at the end is our exit cue. The strangely futuristic road ahead of us that closes the film might be the vestige of a civilization long gone, its metal retaining walls receding into the horizon, surrounded by nature, glowing red, simultaneously primordial and futuristic, as if the present had vanished—it's all as real and deep as a classical landscape and as flat and fake as a backdrop on a film set.

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#### NOTES

- 1 *The Annotated Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*/edited by Stephen Peithman. Avenel, 1981.
- 2 *From Poe to Valery*/T.S. Eliot/*From: On Poetry and Poets* /Faber & Faber 1984.



# The Strange Pleasure of The Leopard Man

GENDER, GENRE AND AUTHORSHIP IN  
A VAL LEWTON THRILLER

SCOTT PRESTON

The recent release by Turner Home Entertainment of the entire Val Lewton horror collection on DVD is both a cause for celebration and an incentive to reevaluation. As one film (*The Ghost Ship*, 1943) has long been unavailable, this is the first time in sixty years that all of the great RKO producer's influential thrillers can be viewed together as an oeuvre. While a few of the films have stood the test of time, recognized as classics for decades, others have been paid little notice, and a few entirely forgotten. What follows is a close look one of the latter, 1943's *The Leopard Man*, adapted from the great pulp novelist Cornell Woolrich's *Black Alibi*.<sup>1</sup>

This story of the hunt for a disturbed serial killer who uses a cat's claw as his weapon of choice was the third film produced by the unit, following their masterpieces *Cat People* (1942) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1942). Jacques Tourneur, who directed all three, would go on to make the film noir classic *Out of the Past* (1947). Auteur studies of the unit's films, whether focused on Lewton or Tourneur, normally mention *The Leopard Man* only in passing; *Cat People* and *Zombie* are the great works and *Leopard* was a misfire. Three books published on Val Lewton share a dismissive attitude toward the film. The only sustained analysis in English is in Chris Fujiwara's book, *Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall*.<sup>2</sup> While it makes for an excellent starting point, there is much more to say about this flawed yet fascinating work.

I agree with the consensus that *Leopard* lacks the transcendent poetic quality of its two predecessors. Yet, there are a number of reasons why it deserves a closer look. A proper examination does not exist of the film's source material and the team's work of adaptation. Woolrich remains to this day an underappreciated figure in America literature, arguably contributing more material to film, radio and television than did any other pulp writer of his generation. His best novels of the 1940s, of which *Black Alibi* is one, can easily stand alongside those of his more celebrated contemporaries. *Leopard* also marks a number of firsts. The fusion of Woolrich, Lewton and Tourneur make the film arguably the first noir-horror hybrid, entangling generic, stylistic and thematic elements that remain in place in cinema to this day. Additionally, the rise of the serial killer as a significant

figure in American popular culture lends importance to what is perhaps the first realistic representation of this modern monster in American movies.

It is the unique relays between authorship, genre and 1940s gender issues that animate this modest thriller, priming it for close study. My analysis of *The Leopard Man* will concentrate on three areas: affect, theme, and character. In all of these, the film has clear intentions, but its success with each is limited. At the level of affect, Lewton and his team have set out to create an atmosphere of terror and suspense, much as they had so successfully done with their first two attempts at the horror genre. In its best moments, the film equals its predecessors for nail-biting tension and frights. Yet, its unique approach in this area limits its ability to develop a narrative as thematically rich as those earlier works. The film's central theme of doomed fortune is both a legitimate poetic approach to sadness and loss, and a disturbing evasion of the real social issues of gender and violence tied to its representations. The tension between allegory and history plays out in the development of the story's central characters: Jerry Manning, the protagonist/investigator; Clo-Clo, the doomed dancer; and, Dr. Galbraith, the serial killer.

By comparing the film to its source novel by Woolrich, considering its relationship to horror and film noir, and reflecting on its representation of men and women, I hope to arrive at a better understanding of its ideological tensions as well as an appreciation for the film's strengths in spite of its weaknesses.

## "An entrance they'll never forget"

*The Leopard Man* is set in an unnamed city in the American Southwest in the present day. Jerry Manning/Dennis O'Keefe is a publicity agent for his girlfriend Kiki Walker/Jean Brooks, a performer who is looking for an edge over her competition on the nightclub circuit. Manning arrives in the opening scene with his latest scheme: he has rented a tame black leopard from a local and he wants Kiki to walk it on a leash in public as a publicity stunt. With some persuasion, she agrees. Kiki and her new "pet" waltz into the club in the middle of her rival performer Clo-Clo's act. In retaliation, Clo-Clo intentionally startles the edgy cat and it gets off





A key line of dialogue in *The Leopard Man* may have been borrowed from RKO's sensational publicity material for Leuton's earlier production *Cat People* (1942)

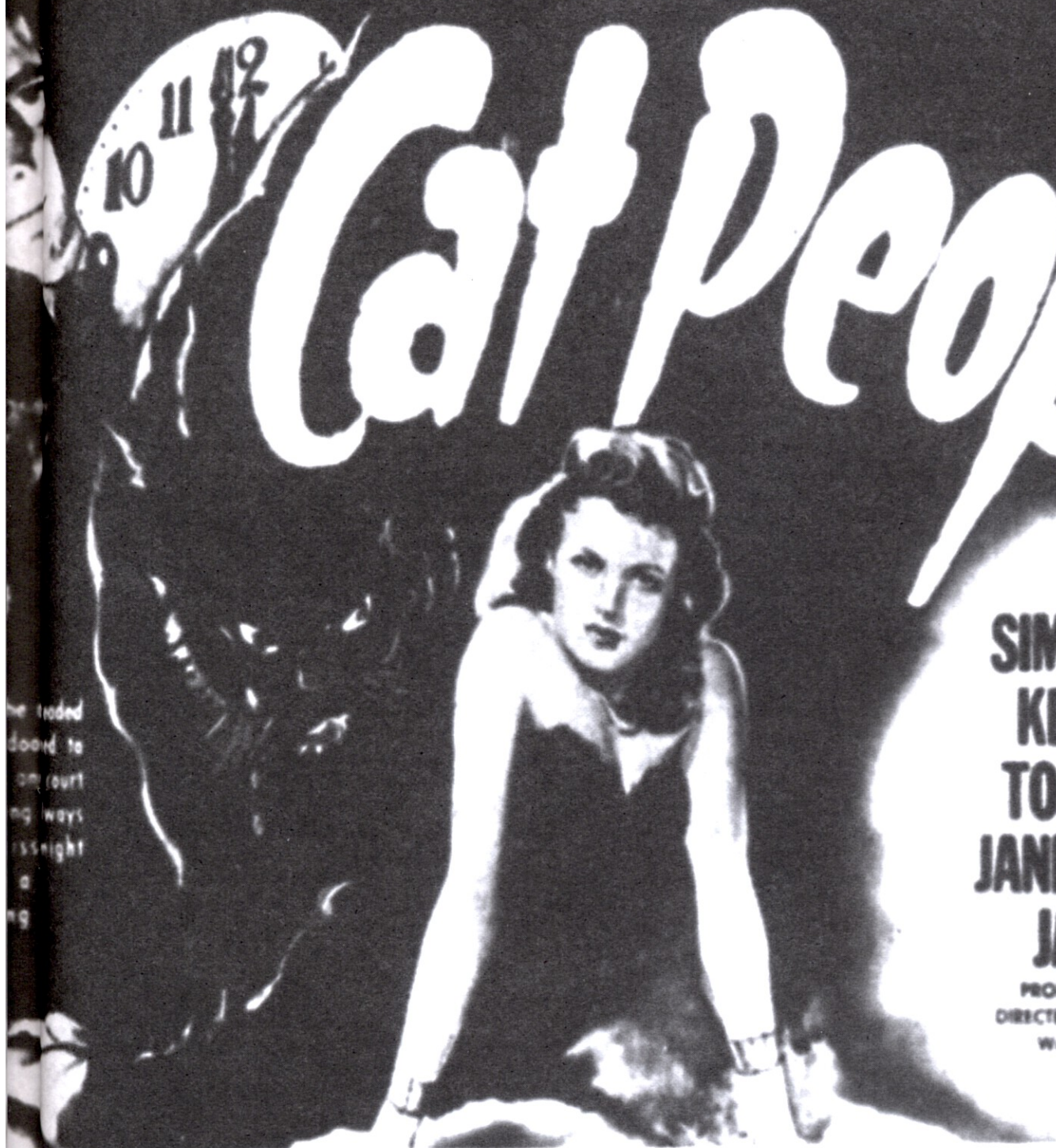
NEW STRANGE, FIERCE PLEASURES THAT  
NO OTHER WOMAN COULD EVER FEEL!

# Cat People

with  
**SIMONE SIM**  
**KENT SMIT**  
**TOM CONW**  
**JANE RANDOL**  
**JACK HOLT**

PRODUCED BY VAL LEWIS  
DIRECTED BY JACQUES TOUR

Written by DeWitt Bodeen





its leash and flees into the night. As the hunt for the escaped animal carries on, young Theresa Delgado, is shooed out the door by her mother to fetch cornmeal for her father's dinner, despite the girl's fears that the leopard might attack. Her worst nightmare comes true.

With Kiki and Manning absolved of responsibility by the police chief, a posse is formed to continue the hunt for the cat. Manning joins the search and meets Galbraith/James Ball, a former professor of zoology who is now curator of the local museum. Meanwhile, Consuelo Contreras, a beautiful young upper-class girl, heads out ostensibly to pay a visit to her father's grave. In fact, she has a clandestine meeting with her boyfriend planned. She arrives at the cemetery gates near closing time and promises not to stay too long. Inside, she cannot find her boyfriend Raoul at their usual rendezvous location and decides to sit and wait a bit. When she realizes it is getting dark, it is too late. The gates have closed and she is trapped inside alone. Soon, she meets the same fate as Theresa Delgado.

The next morning at the crime scene, Manning does not like what he sees and begins to wonder if a man, not a cat, is behind this second death. The killer seems to be using a cat's claw to mask his crimes and misdirect police. Manning talks his theory over with the chief of police and his new friend Galbraith but nobody finds it compelling. Clo-Clo, Kiki's rival performer is the next victim. At the club that evening, she meets a rich gentleman who gives her \$100 but she loses it on the way home and goes back into the dark streets to retrace her steps. The next day, examining Clo-Clo's body, Manning is convinced his theory is correct. A series of clues leads him to suspect Galbraith. He and Kiki concoct a plan to flush out the murderer. She risks her life to lure Galbraith into attacking her while Manning lies in wait with Raoul. When caught, Galbraith admits his crimes but claims that he does not know how to control his strange impulse to kill. Raoul shoots him before he can say anymore.

### *"In the darkness, the eyes full of fear"*

#### LEWTON'S AESTHETICS OF TERROR

Val Lewton told a story of how he went from his position as assistant to David Selznick to producer of horror films at RKO. "Someone told them I had written horrible novels, they mistook the word 'horrible' for 'horror' and I got the job", he said. The anecdote, true or not, stands as a wonderful testament to his self-deprecating sense of humor as well as his modesty.<sup>3</sup> The real story is surely that he was one of the most promising young producers in Hollywood, well known to RKO, and a prime candidate for the position. It also points to a very significant aspect of his background. Between 1923 and about 1935, in addition to work in journalism and film, Lewton was a prolific and quite successful writer. He published at least ten works of fiction, six of non-fiction and a book of verse. As well, he estimated that he had contributed at least 100 short pieces (fiction and non-fiction) to various magazines during the period. One of his novels, *No Bed of Her Own* (1932), received notice at the time as the first serious work of fiction to deal with the depression in America.<sup>4</sup>

Lewton had a voracious appetite for literature to go along with a photographic memory and, beginning at an early age, he would employ the two to spin tales to whoever would listen. This skill for storytelling combined with economic circum-

stances led to his taking on more writing assignments than most people could handle. He even turned out two pornographic novels for the 42nd Street crowd. That this literate, Columbia University-educated son of an upper-middle class family could write poetry and history one week, and pulp novels and porn the next, indicates a tolerance of the extremes of popular culture that served him well with RKO. While someone else may have turned up their nose at the position and either rejected it, or produced the films with the kind of hatred for the material that results in forgettable work, Lewton instead elevated what in 1942 was an embarrassing "low" genre into art.

By the beginning of the 1940's, the major studios' flirtation with big budget horror was over and only Universal was still producing the films with any regularity at all. Poverty Row production houses continued to rely on the horror formula and churned out most of what was now an established but poorly regarded genre. Lewton's task was simple then. Nobody would care about the quality of the films as long as he made them competently and efficiently. Yet, he saw a greater potential in the horror film and he set about getting it there. Around him, he collected a small group of respected colleagues (director Tourneur, editor Mark Robson, writers Ardel Wray and De Witt Bodeen, cinematographer Nick Musuraca) and consciously got to work at making a different kind of horror film.

From the very beginning, Lewton turned everywhere for source material. Drawing on his love for and knowledge of art, literature, and history, he used novels, short stories, poetry, painting, and music to enrich the series that began with *Cat People* in 1942. We know that among his first ideas for *Cat People* (he was given only the title by the studio) was to use a short story by the horror writer Algernon Blackwood. He eventually discarded the idea in favour of an original tale but the pattern of turning to literature and art continued. *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) loosely retells Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* set in the unique milieu of Haiti's indigenous Vodoun religion (treated with the utmost respect after careful study by the unit). *The Seventh Victim* (1943) although an original story, employs references to John Donne and Dante. *Isle of the Dead* (1945) is inspired by an Arnold Boecklin painting of the same name as well as *The Premature Burial* by Poe; *The Body Snatcher* (1945), from the Stevenson story based on the notorious real-life grave robbers Burke and Hare; *Bedlam* (1946) from a painting and other works by the artist William Hogarth. This aspect of the Lewton cycle gives the films a distinctiveness and flavour of authenticity that positively shines next to their competition for horror audiences of the early 1940's.

Perhaps amidst all this sophisticated historical material, a contemporary suspense novelist like Woolrich, known for his work in pulp magazines, seems not to warrant a second glance. Maybe someone higher up forced this "junk" on Lewton and his team? Certainly, neither Joel Siegel nor Edmund Bansak, writing extensive books on Lewton's films, gives *The Leopard Man* much attention.<sup>5</sup> The latter spends a lot of time detailing the holes and implausible situations in the plot. Siegel, meanwhile, dismisses the film as "a straight-forward mystery thriller" with "a thin nasty-minded story" and finally, "little more than an exercise in sadistic voyeurism". He seems incapable of recognizing the author's contribution to the work. While noting that the film is "unconventionally structured", he claims the source novel "was probably too conventional to please Lewton and



Tourneur...and lacking the kind of suspense they favoured...the Woolrich material hardly merits the sophisticated Lewton narrative technique". To me, this statement is outrageous. Nobody who has read *Black Alibi* could ever come to this conclusion. The book is a masterly exercise in the orchestration of tension and suspense. Its unusual structure is punctuated with passages of breathtaking menace and dark poetry. *Black Alibi* fits perfectly into the pattern of sources drawn upon by the unit.

Far from being too sophisticated to appreciate Woolrich, Lewton surely identified deeply with the author. Besides the fact that they were both young writers who wound up writing genre fiction to eke out a living, Lewton and Woolrich had other things in common. They were the same age, born exactly six months apart (Woolrich in December 1903, Lewton the following May). Both were of East European heritage, both grew up estranged from their fathers, and both attended Columbia University at the same time. It is not hard to picture them sitting next to each other in an English class discussing Scott Fitzgerald's latest novel and their dreams of following in his footsteps. What seems likely, if nothing else, is that Lewton knew of Woolrich's work, even if the decision to adapt *Black Alibi* was not his own. Siegel only mentions that the studio insisted on a name change to *The Leopard Man*. Woolrich's biographer notes that the movie rights to *Black Alibi* were sold within months of its publication or, in other words, by the summer of 1942, just after Lewton joined RKO.

Both the distinctive narrative structure and the orchestration of suspense found in *The Leopard Man* owe almost everything to the words Woolrich wrote. It is incredible to read *Black Alibi* and discover that Lewton and Tourneur's most powerful sequences, the three "night walks" ending in death, are described in detail in the novel, sometimes just as they've been shot. In fact, the moment always mentioned in descriptions of the film, Theresa Delgado's demise suggested with chilling economy by simply showing her blood trickle in underneath the door, is not the filmmakers' at all. Perhaps the ultimate example for horror aficionados of Lewton's less-is-more approach to screen terror appears exactly as Woolrich wrote it. Histories of the horror film continually honour Lewton's unit for pioneering a completely new kind of horror film: the less-is-more, psychological approach to terror. But, within *The Leopard Man*, Woolrich's writing deserves as much credit for the film's technique as Tourneur's eye and Lewton's governing hand.

Far less recognized than their invention of the subtle chiller-thriller, however, is the group's early development of horror's most famous modern subgenre, the slasher film. For the combination of Woolrich's unique narrative structure and the unit's decision to preserve it during adaptation resulted in RKO unwittingly producing a prototype for a cycle that would terrorize teens around the world some 35 years later. Many of the key ingredients are here: the repetition of stalking sequences, the killer whose identity remains hidden, the beautiful young victim (usually female), and the violent death. Significantly, the film predates by two decades Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), and Mario Bava's *Sei donne per l'assassino* (aka *Blood and Black Lace*, 1964)<sup>6</sup>, the examples almost every expert on the slasher film lists as the genre's forebears. Someone needs to rewrite the history books.

Because we are so used to the formula today, it is easy to

miss what must have been shocking to audiences in 1943. How many people could have anticipated that the film would kill off young Theresa Delgado, after having spent time to sketch her character so sympathetically? It even tricks us into thinking she is safe when she makes it through the dark tunnel the first time, only to have her encounter the leopard on the way back. Even if they were able to recover from this terrible shock, the audience would now settle into what appears to be a traditional murder mystery. The amateur detectives, Jerry and Kiki, with the help of Dr. Galbraith, would go through the motions and solve the case. When introduced to Consuelo on the morning of her birthday, they would sense the narrative taking an odd turn, but with the time spent developing her character, it must have been stunning to see her die like Theresa. A killer who repeated his crime over and over until he was caught was a rare movie villain in 1943. The cemetery attack, minus today's slasher frame-of-reference, would be a terrifying jolt, leaving viewers wondering what they had got themselves into. Long before Hitchcock killed off Marion in *Psycho*, the Lewton team, following Cornell Woolrich's lead, set convention and audience expectation on its head in *The Leopard Man*.

It is because of this focus on the victims that the film stands out from so many of its stalk-and-slash brethren to follow. It gives us a chance to see what the slasher film might have been, had it taken a different path. We have to credit Woolrich with this approach, for it seems to have been his intention in *Black Alibi* to write a story that puts its reader in close identification with those doomed by the novel's dark menace. While the book is designed on the one hand as a very calculated exercise in tension and terror, on the other it is structured very much as a series of character sketches of each of its female victims. Lewton's faithful adaptation then presents us with a rare kind of psycho film, one that spends time and effort humanizing its victims. They are not there just to serve as objects of violence. Instead, there is time to get to know a little about each of these women: Theresa Delgado, Consuelo Contreras, and Clo-Clo. The novel, in fact, has two more: Sally O'Keefe and Marjorie King from a fourth attack left out of the film, and this last pair is the real key to Woolrich's vision.

Near the end of *Black Alibi*, Sally survives an attack by the killer but watches her friend Marjorie become his latest victim. The next day, Manning goes to her and asks her help in his plan to catch the madman. The book saves its most powerful writing for this penultimate chapter, as Sally risks her life to lure and capture the killer. "A very brave girl. A girl who has more courage than you or I have any right to expect any girl to have," as Manning describes her. Both a brilliant exercise in suspense and a moving, celebratory portrait of a woman's strength in the face of tragedy, this chapter complicates any simple accusation that the violence the story directs at its female victims is cheap and exploitative. While the bravery of Sally O'Keefe doesn't quite survive the translation to the screen, where Kiki's similar actions in the final moments get lost in the rush to tie up the storyline, the film still seems to have its heart in the right place. Unlike so many stalker films that follow it, here is a thriller that in the end is more interested in its victims as persons than it is in the psychosis of its killer, his method of murder, or his hunt and capture by the authorities.

Yet, *The Leopard Man* for all its innovation leaves me unsatisfied. I can trace this feeling to the disjuncture between the



theme it wants to express and its representation of a modern serial killer. Here is where poetry and ideology inevitably entangle in a swiftly made 66-minute low-budget thriller. The Lewton team wants to convey a sense of doom and fate hanging over the town and its people, preserving the dark premise of Woolrich's novel. To do so, it must carry out a delicate dance with realism. The victims, the setting, and the killer need to be true-to-life in order to capture just the right sense of modern terror, but the film cannot address what kind of person Galbraith might really be. It reminds us that these monsters, soon called serial killers, really do exist; but the wellspring of their monstrosity is unfathomable. They are just evil, plain and simple.

In Lewton and Tourneur's *Cat People*, Dr. Louis Judd (played by Tom Conway) serves as a voice of reason and medical science brought in to cure Irena's fears that she will turn into a cat. In their first session together, he tells her that her strange beliefs are likely the result of a repressed memory from childhood, "a canker in the mind" he calls it. He exudes total confidence in his ability to cure her. Of course, things hardly go as planned, but this scene raises an important question about *The Leopard Man*: Where is Dr. Judd when we need him!? After all, despite his untimely demise at the hands of Irena at the end of the story, Lewton later revived the character for an appearance in *The Seventh Victim* when the script called for another psychiatrist. In fact, psychoanalysis was everywhere in Hollywood movies by 1943, so much so that the absence of a clinical voice has to have been a conscious decision on the part of the Lewton team. In sequences mainly added to Woolrich's story by the filmmakers, characters instead struggle to find words and ideas to explain why a man might commit such a crime.

**JERRY: There's all sorts of men. I've met some pretty funny ones in bars and nightclubs.**

**GALBRAITH: Oh, I understand what you mean. Demented men, pathological cases. But what sort of man would kill like a leopard and leave the traces of a leopard.**

**JERRY: Crazy guy?**

And in a later scene,

**JERRY: You know a lot. Taken a lot of fancy college courses and that kind of stuff. If it were a man, what kind of a man would kill like that?**

**GALBRAITH: All those fancy courses were about the dead, Jerry, not the living.**

**JERRY: Alright, the dead then. In history, there must have been men like that, men with kinks in their brains.**

**GALBRAITH: Yes, there have been men who killed for pleasure, strange pleasure. There was Bluebeard in France, Jack the Ripper in London. It's not uncommon.**

**JERRY: And if there were a man like that, with a kink in his brain, running around loose. What would he be like?**

**GALBRAITH: He'd be a hard man to find, particularly if he were a clever man. He'd go about his business calmly except when the fit to kill was on him.**

The terrible irony is that the person taking the place of the psychoanalyst in this conversation is himself the killer. Moreover, he will later confess that he does not know why he kills, why the urge comes over him. Dr. Judd's "a canker in the mind" situated

within the discourse of repressed memories and childhood trauma becomes "a kink in the brain", "strange pleasure" with no contextualization or explanation at all. A damaged human psyche with a cause and a cure becomes the modern psychopath, a terrifying sexual predator whose motives are inscrutable, and whose crimes are frighteningly unpredictable, unexplainable and therefore uncontrollable.

Why the absence of a medical opinion in the film? There are two ways to answer this. One, the killer's inexplicable urges are part of the film's theme of doomed fortune. At the same time, by effacing the real psychosexual explanation for Galbraith's murders, the narrative can sidestep the social issues raised by the psychopath in the 1940's. I will deal with these one at a time.

### **"We know little about the forces that move us" FATALISM AND DOOMED FORTUNE**

While crime, mystery and horror films were often lumped together in the 1930's and 40's, from today's perspective *The Leopard Man* looks like the first true horror/noir hybrid. Others make the case for *Cat People*, which does share some themes and stylistic elements with *film noir*, and of course the same production team. Yet, only *The Leopard Man* combines a crime thriller (the genre of most *noir* films) with so many elements of horror. Moreover, it boasts unbeatable credentials in its source material. For if ever there were crowned a "king of *film noir*", it would have to be Cornell Woolrich. The list of his stories and novels adapted to film, television and radio in 1940's and 1950's is something to behold. I doubt there is any other person with more fingerprints on the cycle of post-war thrillers we know today as *noir*. The themes and subjects of all his work (death, fate, loneliness, murder, suspense, shadows, desperate men, dangerous women, and dark streets) read like a summary of the genre.

Perhaps the defining hallmark of *noir* is its tone of bleak fatalism. It is through this tone, and its expression in the theme of doomed fortune, that we best see Woolrich's contribution to *The Leopard Man*. Devilishly, the film puts its theme in the mouth of its killer. As Manning expresses concern about the danger of the escaped leopard, Galbraith responds:

**Don't feel so concerned Jerry...I've seen a bit of life, and I have learned one thing. We are like that ball dancing on the fountain. We know as little about the forces that move us and move the world around us as that empty ball, which lives only because the water pushes it into the air, lets it fall and catches it again. You shouldn't feel too badly about Teresa Delgado.**

The same sentiment is repeated at the film's conclusion by Manning himself. In between, we see three women die, a respected member of the community revealed as a serial killer, and a young man imprisoned for his murder. Why do these things happen? If we look to the pattern of the murders, we sense that some unspeakable force hangs over the entire town, orchestrating events.

The dancer Clo-Clo is the first character introduced to us in the film. We hear her castanets, a motif that runs throughout the film, and we see them provoke an angry reaction from her rival, Kiki. From this point on until she meets her end, Clo-Clo



will touch the lives of each of the characters in the film, carrying doom to all who cross her path. Her actions set the leopard loose in the first place, as she frightens it off Kiki's leash. She greets Theresa on the street just before the girl leaves for the store. She has an encounter with the Contreras family's servant girl on the day Consuelo dies. The film uses Clo-Clo narratively to connect all the victims and their stories but she also seems to curse them by her presence. Thematically, she is a doomed character, as her friend the fortune teller knows full well, and she brings misfortune to all those who encounter her. But why Clo-Clo? She is actually a very likable and positive character. We must remember Galbraith's lines: "We know little about the forces that move the world around us". It is not our place to ask why, and the answers are not available to us. The more innocent the victim, the more powerful the theme of doomed fortune becomes.

Throughout this town, forces are moving that appear on the surface to be mere chance. All of the deaths turn on this element of chance. Martha Nochimson's recent analysis suggesting an economic connection in the deaths contains a mistaken impression of key details.<sup>8</sup> While her mother forces Theresa to go to the store for cornmeal, she goes all the way across town, and into the leopard's path, for no reason other than bad luck. Arriving too late at the nearby store, the owner refuses to reopen for her. This leads to her terrifying walk across the arroyo and under the bridge to find another store that will still be open. Consuelo's story is the same. She is not in the cemetery to hide her lower-class boyfriend from her family (as Nochimson claims). Her mother knows that she is going to see him. She simply misses meeting Raoul by mere moments. Another case of unlucky timing. ("Time is strange. A moment can be as short as a breath or as long as eternity", the gatekeeper tells her as she enters the cemetery). We later learn that Galbraith just happened to be walking by that night and heard her cries for help. Finally, Clo-Clo completes the pattern. What at first seems like a good break, the chance encounter with the man at the nightclub, and his gift of \$100, turns bad when she loses it by accident on the way home and must go back out into the night to retrieve it. This pattern of bad breaks, bad timing, and chance encounters may seem like little more than coincidence or lazy screenwriting, but the film's status as *noir* compels us to take the theme of doomed fortune seriously.

It is important to see that the use of fate in *The Leopard Man* is a legitimate dramatic device, based on a longstanding moral conception of human and divine justice. Personified as a feminine deity in late Roman culture, the mysterious ways of Lady Fortune, remained a central concern of philosophy, literature, and visual art throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. With her wheel, upon which the rich and powerful balanced on top and the downtrodden dwelled below, she reminded all of society that both happiness and sadness were only temporary. At her whim, a gentle spin sent those on top crashing down, exchanging places suddenly with the poor and powerless. Theologians debated her nature. Church fathers agonized over the persistence of her cult following. Dante gave her a special place in the heavens in the *Inferno*, while Calvin dismissed her as a misunderstanding of Divine Providence. She appeared throughout Elizabethan and Baroque tragedy, and remained an influence into the 19th century. Finding a traditional theme like this in a low-budget horror film might seem like a stretch

under any other circumstance, but we are dealing with Val Lewton here.

Of course, the idea of Fortune blindly controlling our fate does not sit well in modern times. It is a deeply religious conception of life, far out of step with our whole worldview today. We believe strongly that each individual makes his or her own destiny. Choice, responsibility, material cause and effect: the modern world operates, at least ideally, with transparency. In a narrative, an appeal to a predestined order is easily misunderstood as a cheap means of explaining away unexpected events, or as a way to give a "thin nasty-minded story" an illusion of depth. In this case, however, the sense of tragedy is genuine. It comes directly from Woolrich's universe. Nobody had a darker sensibility and a more fatalistic view of existence than Cornell Woolrich. Francis Nevins, his biographer, returns repeatedly to a moment in the author's youth that crystallizes his outlook. In Woolrich's own words, it went like this: "One night when I was eleven and, huddling over my own knees, looked up at the low-hanging stars of the Valley of Anahuac, and knew I would surely die finally, or something worse."<sup>9</sup> The sadness and the darkness of these words haunt every sentence he ever wrote, and they cast a long shadow over the world of *The Leopard Man* as well.

In the end, however, by offering fate as an explanation for the events of the film, including the psyche of the killer, the film avoids addressing the social psychology of violent crime and sexual predators. Although it has no obligation to do so, its subject and its representations implicate it in the discourse anyway. I want to turn, finally, to a look at gender and ideology, and the historical context of the psychopath in American society.

### **"What sort of man would kill like a leopard?" THE SEXUAL PSYCHOPATH IN THE 1940s**

*The Leopard Man* is the first realistic depiction of a serial killer in American cinema. Today, serial killers are everywhere, from box office hits to academy awards ceremonies, network television series, and best selling books of fiction and non-fiction. In 1940, very little fiction attempted his representation. *Leopard's* only predecessors are Fritz Lang's German masterpiece *M* (1930) and Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) which was actually released just months before *Leopard*. I want to briefly compare those films' depiction of the killer along with the differences between Woolrich's and Lewton's, then I will look more closely at how Galbraith operates within *The Leopard Man's* narrative. First, a bit of history.

Estelle Freedman reminds us that beginning in the late 1930s a "sex crime panic" swept America. In 1935, the first of many government commissions formed to investigate the situation. In the media, more and more coverage of attacks on women and children appeared. So much so that "in 1937 the *New York Times* itself created a new index category 'Sex Crimes' to encompass the 143 articles it published on the subject that year."<sup>10</sup> At this time, Woolrich was at the peak of his power and success as a short story writer for the detective and thriller magazines. In 1939, he wrote *The Street of Jungle Death*, a story about a series of murders in Los Angeles that would become the basis of *Black Alibi*. The tale's psychopath, and his descendants in the novel and screen versions, is very much the product of this historical moment.

One question that emerges from the study of this era—and it is a difficult one to answer with any certainty—is how much



of the public fear was socially constructed and how much of it was a reaction to a genuine threat. Certainly, one can list a whole string of macabre and sensational cases from Jack the Ripper (1888) and Chicago's H.H. Holmes (1895) to the Vampire of Düsseldorf, Peter Kurten (1930), who may have inspired Fritz Lang's *M*, and the unsolved Cleveland Torso Murders (1937). Freedman, however, emphasizes the social purpose served by the sex crime panic. She suggests that the exaggerated threat of the prowling urban psychopath helped society deal with "a complex redefinition of sexual boundaries in modern America."

For a number of years, especially since the end of the First World War, the Victorian ideal of female purity had been eroding. Women who were once desexualized and confined to the domestic sphere were now circulating in the public spaces of the modern city: working, playing, dressing in comparatively revealing modern fashions, and generally rewriting what it meant to be a woman. At the same time, the meaning of manhood was undergoing its own transformations. The 19th century's emphasis on *character*, when interior values of honesty, integrity, and self-made success were most important, had begun to shift to an emphasis on *appearance and attitude*.<sup>11</sup> The term "hard-boiled", used to describe a certain kind of tough male detective emerged at this time (and would be a key ingredient in *film noir*). In these ways, American society adjusted its understanding of female and male sex roles and traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. In the 1930's, the onset of the Great Depression added another factor, as many men found themselves out of work, unable to be the breadwinner for their family. It is in this context that the psychopath, previously a little-used clinical term came to be associated with a dangerous, specifically male, sexual deviant.

The boundaries drawn by the new category of "sexual psychopath" were used to regulate the definition of "normal" masculinity in a time of upheaval and crisis. They positioned the male subject according to his perceived gender traits: a sex fiend was a man with too much masculinity, and a homosexual was a man with not enough. The associated moral panic then presented homosexuals as dangers to children while the sex fiend preyed on women alone or unaccompanied in the city. Freedman interprets these warnings in the context of the changing sex roles during the period. In this way, public fear was as much about the *control of women* as it was about *any real threat to them*. Society told women that they were at risk of attack if they are out alone in public. At the same time, it warned of the constant peril to their children of attack and/or recruitment by homosexuals. Naturally, safety was best achieved if women remained at home, supervised the kids, and accepted their domestic role rather than continue their disruptive breach of the public sphere.

As an occasional gruesome news story and as a general social panic, the phenomenon of the violent sex predator undoubtedly appealed to Cornell Woolrich's dark imagination. How would he integrate this into his world of *noir* fiction? In *Black Alibi*, with its metaphysical approach to evil, we never learn anything about the killer's life, background, motives or actions. He just appears, kills and sinks back into the night, until the final chapter reveals his identity. He turns out to be the Chief of Police, a character Manning interacted with throughout the story and who appeared completely normal all along. The

Lewton unit's adaptation chooses to flesh out the killer's character some more. Galbraith is also an esteemed member of his community, a former professor, now the museum curator. This aspect of their characters is worth noting. In both *M* and *Shadow of a Doubt*, the murderer was a more typical outsider to the community.<sup>12</sup> By bringing the killer closer to home, the film forces us to rethink standard histories. Freedman, for example, leaves us with the impression that it would not be possible for audiences in the 1940s to imagine a sexual psychopath as we see him today, as someone seemingly very normal, the so-called "guy next door". This frightening picture is generally thought to have emerged later.<sup>13</sup> But here, the Lewton approach to everyday horror, mixed with Woolrich's *noir* sensibility, leads the film in a startling direction. At a time when America was told to direct their fear at outsiders, transients, and "perverts", *The Leopard Man* warns that sexual psychopaths could be just about anyone around you.

What the film does not address is *why* a man like Galbraith does what he does; or, more accurately, I would suggest that it simply cannot address this. For, the very ideological apparatus that lay behind the sex crime panic also animates the generic codes of the horror film's production and reception, especially in this classical period. An answer to why men attack women and the reasons behind the "sexual psychopath scare" of the 1940's are both found at the intersections of gender, power, and fear. A horror film like *The Leopard Man* can't directly address why psychos kill because, as a horror film, it is constructed upon the very same ideology of gender that must be questioned to find the answer. Only a deconstructive horror film could perform this analysis, and in the genre's classical period this can not be expected.

As Rhona Berenstein has shown, the standard gender dynamics in the reception of classical horror rely on the activation of female viewers' fear, reflected on screen by the victim's scream, and a corresponding notion of masculinity, asserted by the male viewers' refusal to show the same fear, and by comforting and "protecting" the woman.<sup>14</sup> In other words, when most men and women went to horror movies, the girls would act scared and they guys would act like they weren't, and put their arm around them. That this was how you were supposed to react was reinforced in the film's publicity material, critical reviews, and on the screen itself. This performance of gender, contrasting fear with courage, was at the heart of the popular reception of the horror film in its classical period, and *The Leopard Man*, for all its innovations, remains classical in this regard.

The film establishes its motif of the woman's scream in the opening scene. Manning enters Kiki's dressing room with the leopard on its leash. The cigarette girl and Kiki each let out a scream and Kiki even climbs onto a chair in a classic display of fear. Manning, in turn, reassures her that the cat is not harmful and talks her into using it in her act. In its first five minutes, the film has economically established classical horror's traditional gender roles: women show fear; men act cool and reassure them that they are safe. Later, the design of each of the three "night walks" is punctuated by a look of fear, a scream, and a death. As Berenstein points out, these two elements, the woman's scream and her look of fear at an off-screen terror, were staples of the horror film from its earliest years. The Lewton team is employing an easily identifiable generic signifier here and the way it is implicated in Galbraith's madness invites an ideological read-



ing of the film's killer. For this, a closer look at Galbraith's character is needed.

Our first opportunity to learn about him is in the nightclub the day after the Delgado attack. Jerry invites Kiki to come along for a drink with Galbraith before she goes on stage. In what is otherwise a rather casual encounter, our killer's body language and speech suggest he feels uncomfortable around women. He fiddles with his pipe and makes cryptic comments. He seems in awe of Kiki's modest celebrity. The best line in this scene is easily misunderstood as poor writing when it is actually very calculated. As Kiki expresses concern about a poor reception from the crowd, Galbraith tells her, "I'm sure if you are as talented as you are beautiful, Ms. Walker, you'll have nothing to worry about." She politely thanks him but you can almost sense her and Manning giggling under their breath. Galbraith simply does not know how to talk to women. Instead, he spouts lines from a romance novel. With claims that James Bell does not make a very convincing serial killer, I disagree completely. In this scene, the actor conveys just the right mix awkwardness, harmlessness and mystery, anticipating portrayals like Anthony Perkins's Norman Bates and Robert Deniro's Travis Bickle that will follow it.

To work, however, this scene needs a counterpart later in the film. It is important that we see Galbraith speak to men with confidence and control because it will help emphasize his difficulty relating specifically to women. The scene in which Manning and Charlie How-Come, the naïve owner of the escaped leopard, visit Galbraith at the museum does just this. Manning begins by running his theory of a human killer past the professor. Their discussion, at first friendly, begins to take on a hint of menace, even cruelty. We can see him take pleasure in his power and authority over both men, control which derives principally from the confident way he uses words. In contrast to the scene with Kiki, Galbraith's command of language here allows him to both put Manning off his trail and even convince the two that Charlie may have committed the murders while he was drunk! He insists he's just playing a game of whodunit, but we get to see here another side of our killer. Strong and confident in his own element, he only loses his power in the presence of a beautiful or desirable woman.

One way of understanding sexual murderers from Jack the Ripper to Ted Bundy and Galbraith in *The Leopard Man* is that they act out violently at women as a way of dealing with their fear or frustration when faced with female sexuality. If they are not confident that they measure up to society's definition of legitimate masculinity, female sexuality can seem to hold power over them. An inability to relate to women in an acceptable and effective manner, and the loss of power that seems to go with it, can suggest to them that to act out violently will put sexuality back on their terrain, back in their control. This is what is playing itself out in *The Leopard Man*. A final contrast between scenes drives this point home.

Finally, on the last night of Clo-Clo's life, she goes to the nightclub and meets an older gentleman (named Brunton in the film's screenplay and in the novel). He buys her a drink and the ensuing scene between them is a wonderful game of cat-and-mouse as the two flirt and laugh. The gentleman, who never appears again, exists on the narrative level simply to provide Clo-Clo with the \$100 bill she will lose on her way home. Venturing back out into the night to retrieve it will cost her her

life. Yet, this scene also echoes the one between Kiki and Galbraith mentioned above. Brunton represents a striking contrast to the tongue-tied killer in the way he relates to women. Here is a man who is not threatened or intimidated by the beautiful Clo-Clo's sexuality. He charms her, makes her laugh and shows an interest in her beyond her looks. She in turn seems genuinely attracted by his approach. We are left with a picture of positive male-female relations, a perfect date. Appropriately, the scene is the only light moment in the entire film. If only Galbraith could act this way with Kiki, he might not find himself stammering a confession in these final words – words that vividly tie fear to notions of gender and power.

**Galbraith: I didn't wanna kill but I had to. I heard the little girl talking to the man in the cemetery. When he went away, I thought I was gonna help her get over the wall. I can't remember. I looked down. In the darkness, I saw her white face, the eyes full of fear. Fear, that was it. The little frail body, soft skin, and then – she screamed.**

He may not understand why he is attracted to the sight of fear in a woman's eyes and the sound of her scream but, surely, we can.

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## Notes

- 1 Cornell Woolrich. *Black Alibi*. New York: Ballantyne Books, 1982. This is the most recent paperback edition. The original hardcover was published by Simon & Schuster in April, 1942.
- 2 Chris Fujiwara. *Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall*. Jefferson, N.C./London: McFarland, 1998.
- 3 This anecdote appears in Manny Farber's tribute to Lewton upon the producer's death. See Manny Farber. "Val Lewton and the School of Shudders" in Roy Huss and T.J. Ross eds., *Focus on the Horror Film*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972.
- 4 Kingly Books republished *No Bed of Her Own* in 2006.
- 5 See Joel E. Seigel. *Val Lewton: The Reality of Terror*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1972, and Edmund G. Bansak. *Fearing the Dark: The Val Lewton Career*. Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 1995.
- 6 Oddly enough, a young Bava was the director of photography on one of Tourneur's last features, *La Battaglia di maratona* (1959). Might the two have discussed *The Leopard Man* on the set five years before Bava invented the Italian slasher genre, the *giallo*?
- 7 On the portrayal of psychoanalysts in cinema, see Krin Gabbard and Glen O. Gabbard. *Psychiatry and the Cinema*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- 8 Martha Nochimson. "Val Lewton at RKO: The Social Dimensions of Horror". *Cineaste*. Vol. 31, No. 4 (Fall 2006), pp 9-17.
- 9 Francis M. Nevins, Jr. *Cornell Woolrich: First You Dream, and Then You Die*. New York: The Mysterious Press, 1988, pp. 8.
- 10 Estelle B. Freedman, "'Uncontrolled Desires': The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960". *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 74, No.1 (Jun., 1987), pp. 83.
- 11 See, for example, Tom Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture 1900-1950*. Columbia/London: University of Missouri Press, 2000.
- 12 Although in *Shadow*, Hitchcock blurs this distinction by making him a member of the extended family.
- 13 The "guy next door" phenomenon is also known as the "mask of sanity". This term comes from a pioneering work of psychiatry published in 1940 by Dr. Henry Cleckly. The notion, though, was just emerging but far from accepted at this time. See <http://www.cassiopaea.com/cassiopaea/psychopath.htm>
- 14 Rhona J. Berenstein. *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Berenstein goes on to argue that the actual psychology of reception is much less straightforward than this, but the basic assumption, embedded in the films, their publicity, and their critical reception, holds true.



## A TRIBUTE TO Robin Wood

Robin Wood has been with *CineAction* since the beginning—a crucial part of the founding editorial collective in 1985. Robin has retired as one of our editors but will continue as a regular contributor. As a tribute to Robin and his contributions to *CineAction* and to the study of film, we have collected the presentations at a panel which honoured him last year. The Film Studies Association of Canada held its annual conference at York University in Toronto in May, 2006. The Association hosted a tribute to Robin, who is professor emeritus at York where he began teaching film studies in 1977 and still teaches in the Graduate Program in Film. The panel was titled “The Anxiety of Influence—Robin Wood and Critical Film Studies.” The session was the most popular of the conference, with over 100 in attendance.

### KASS BANNING

The idea for planning a festschrift for Robin grew out of a conversation between former and current members of the *CineAction* editorial collective, congregated to celebrate twenty years of *CineAction* last Christmas. We deemed it was shocking that such a tribute, as of yet, had not been conferred. It was indeed the time. When alerted to the festschrift in-the-making, Robin's rejoinder, playing at miscomprehension, was “Do I need a fresh shirt?”

The panel of short responses assembled here chart the “Wood effect,” the distinctive and diverse ways in which Robin's contribution to the field of film criticism has touched them. They speak to “the anxiety of influence,” often cross-hatching the personal and professional world we inhabit.

“Touch” is a key term here. For what under-girds Robin's outstanding prolific productivity, his extensive critical project, and I will leave the panelists to further more minute embellishment, is his enduring commitment to humanism. Robin's oft-mentioned debt to the work of F. R. Leavis, with its insistence on the primacy of the text and the moral imperative, I believe helped him to vigorously resist passing fashions in film analysis, be it linguistic turns or otherwise. At the same time Robin's criticism grew with the field of film studies, fashioning

select emerging models such as sexual politics or ideological critique to his own discerning regard for the film text. He stayed the humanist course, paradigm wars notwithstanding. This consistency, coupled with a steadfast regard for form, nuance and textual detail and disregard for lobbing totalizing theory onto a film, never resulted in reductive readings of films, fostering instead an eye for both “structures of feeling,” and to use one of his favourite terms, the subversive.

### VARDA BURSTYN

I was deeply honoured to be asked to participate in this panel of tribute to Robin Wood.

I am very sorry not to be able to deliver my accolades and my thanks to Robin in person because Robin is a special person -- a hugely special and important human being -- and I want to be there with all of you to celebrate him. I am only sorry that my own chronic health problems have prevented me, at the last minute, from coming. ...

I met Robin Wood in 1978, if memory serves, while I was paving a chequered path at York, and feeling—despite all the political science and sociology and humanities classes that



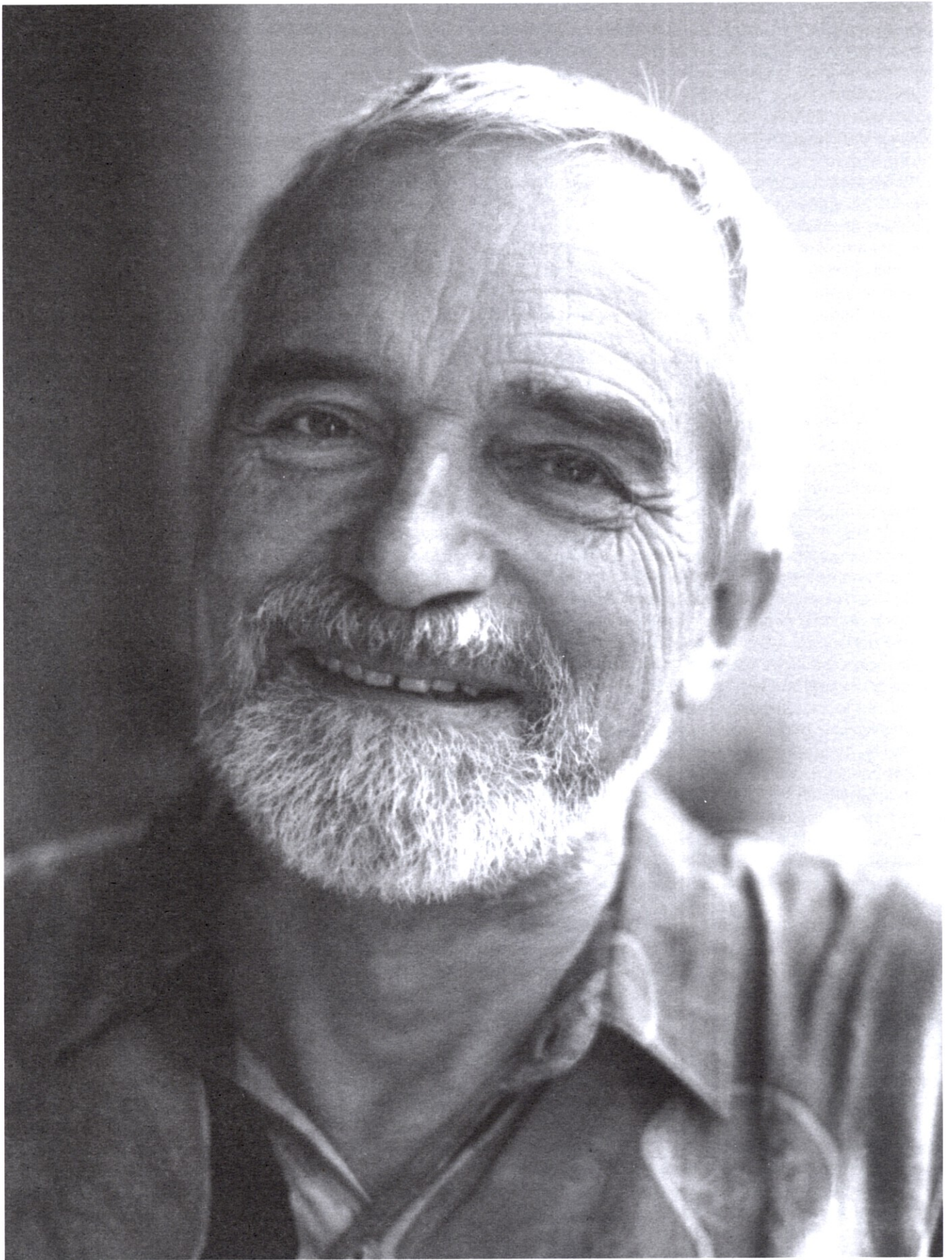


Photo by Harry Oldmeadow



should have been great but weren't—like a fish out of water, I had signed up for a course on film and feminism more as pleasure, a break from all the dutiful analysis of the other courses. But I had no idea what to expect.

What I got—and it was a gift from the goddess—was the amazing, the brilliant, the funny, the incredibly handsome Robin Wood. From the first five minutes of the first class I was totally hooked, and I moved heaven and earth to make sure I attended every one of his classes faithfully—I was not a faithful attendee, I confess, at my others.

Robin's lectures—and beyond that his knowledge, his presence, his attitude to students, that was at once encouraging and demanding of a higher standard of thought and intelligence—were a heady tonic. And, lucky, lucky me, he seemed to value my contribution too. Indeed he valued it enough to befriend me and to encourage me to write about my thoughts on film. And then encouraged me to publish those thoughts.

I had certainly written things before—articles for Marxist newspapers, essays, the usual things—but those had seemed like duties, prose to be churned out, full of admonition and analysis but lacking altogether in joy. Suddenly, writing for Robin, my fingers were flying on the keyboard, ideas were tumbling out like miracles, and I thought "holy cow, this is what writing is supposed to be like, this is great, maybe I'll even be a writer!"

In other words, the pleasure of my mind's engagement with the ideas, the approaches and the personality that Robin brought to the study of film animated my whole being. Truly. And it is no exaggeration to say now that I can look back on almost thirty years—yikes!—and say that his support, encouragement and brilliance had everything to do with the path I chose out of York and into the world as a writer. So this is my "Life Debt" to Robin, and it is huge.

Unlike many of the people here who were once students of Robin or who remain his colleagues today, I passed relatively briefly through film studies, briefly and happily. And so it falls more appropriately to them to take the measure of this extraordinary and enormous legacy in that field.

But I can speak of his legacy beyond it, and it is no mean one. I am sure that every serious student he ever had learned a great deal from Robin—my God, I certainly did. In my book on politics and the culture of sport, I acknowledged my enormous "intellectual debt" to Robin. Here I'd like to conclude by doing it again, more emphatically than ever. For Robin not only helped me to affirm my own understanding of the importance of culture. He extended it and deepened it and helped me approach it with, what I believe, is the right critical approach to take to all cultural phenomena. Here I am speaking of the need to be faithful to the "text" itself—be it one film or a whole body of films, one hockey game or a whole culture of sport, one hyped advertisement about some new technology or a whole, suicidal technopile culture, which is what I have been writing about now for some years.

I, like so many others, was enamoured of a number of theories to analyze culture. Robin was certainly familiar with these and drew on them when useful. But in fact, it was his insistence on fidelity to what is there—not to a pre-conceived idea of what should be there or what would be there or what could be there,

but to what is—that has served me so very, very well in making my way through the whole wild creation of humanity on this crazy planet Earth.

Susan Ditta, first curator of film and video at the National Gallery in Ottawa and the Film and Video Officer at the Canada Council for five years after her tenure at the Gallery, is now a distinguished free-lance curator. She is a very old friend, lives around the corner from me here in Peterborough, and she expressed delight that this event is taking place. "Tell Robin for me," she said, "that he is one of my heroes, my real heroes, and I think we all owe him a huge debt of thanks, of learning, of accomplishment. Tell him that and give him a big hug." So Robin, I've asked Kass to deliver a hug from me, and now to add one from Sue. You are the cat's pyjamas, the bee's knees, the very greatest, and we are so much the better and richer for having learned from you and received your blessings.

## SCOTT FORSYTH

I have been asked to comment on Robin's contribution to *CineAction*, the magazine where we have been editorial colleagues, since its foundation. This began more than 20 years ago and in its conception we were on a mission. There was a Hollywood hit at the time whose heroes, the Blues Brothers, were on a mission from God—for many of us at that founding, given Robin's already immense stature in film studies, a discipline that as Christopher Sharret recently put it, Robin Wood may be considered to have partly invented—we were on a mission with God. So obviously Robin had a tremendous influence on the project and probably added a bit of anxiety to the mixture as well.

Our mission was both modest and dramatic—just to try to publish a magazine of film criticism ourselves but it was a mission—a magazine of radical film criticism

First, we wanted to articulate a relationship to our radical political commitments—to socialism, to feminism, to gay liberation, for some of us to Marxism. Much writing in film studies at that time was rhetorically radical but we hoped to make that politics central to the magazine. Robin's work has always remained urgently militant from that day to this. Recently, he has expressed the opinion that *CineAction* has lost some of its radical edge over the years—perhaps we and our writers wearied by the long years of Reagan, the Bushes, Martin, Harper...and Robin characteristically set out to correct that with what has become his last edited issue—Protest and Revolution.

Second, we had a common antagonism, though from differing perspectives, to what then seemed to be a reigning orthodoxy of film theory—a mélange of Lacan, poststructuralism, avant-gardism, postmodernism—often identified crudely as Screen Theory. Clearly that orthodoxy waned over the decades, hopefully helped by debate and polemic in our pages. If film studies is still marked by scholastic theory-mongering, apolitical, and lingering sophistries, few talk of a unified Theory or postmodernism without a wink—and it also encompasses a pluralism that *CineAction* has encouraged and reflected.



Third, we wanted to produce and edit film criticism, theoretically and politically informed but not about theory, and here we have presented over 20 years, a vast amount of critical work on films from all over the world and throughout film history. Here, again, Robin's contribution has been immense and wide-ranging, again and again insisting, as editor and writer, on close readings of films—and this may not be seen as unique, since the discipline has been defined by, and often too limited by, textual analysis—but criticism that speaks in a personal voice. Robin's voice has been unique—as Peter Harcourt has put it so well, Robin opens up a film for us and opens up the world.

Finally, there are things we didn't plan but accomplished anyway. We didn't plan on becoming the leading film studies journal in Canada but we did become that, with a usefully agnostic, if not antagonistic, relationship to the official academy. We didn't plan on becoming so internationally recognized but we have established such a reputation and a community of readers and writers all over the world. We did not imagine making a crucial contribution to the critical and historical exploration of Canadian films and filmmakers but we have done that. The last few years have seen considerable growth in scholarly writing on Canadian film—if you look, you will see *CineAction* connections all over that. We did not predict the explosion in world cinema that has been so important over the last decades but *CineAction* produced a considerable body of criticism on the exciting new films of Asia, Latin America and Africa. In all these unplanned accomplishments Robin's writing has continued to be central, illuminating once unnoticed corners of world cinema—from Canadian teen movies to the artistry of Kiarostami.

The balance sheet of *CineAction*?—modestly, we have kept producing a magazine of film criticism; more dramatically, we have helped change and grow the study of film. We have not changed the world altogether the way we imagined but we, and particularly Robin, have kept insisting that it *must* change. Robin, it has been an adventure to have been on *CineAction*'s radical mission with you.

## PETER HARCOURT

For people of a certain age, there are key moments when many of us remember what we were doing at the time. Where were you on 22 November 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated? This was a recurring question. Another was: Where were you when Neil Armstrong first walked on the moon?

Well on that date, 20 July 1969, I was out at Welwyn Garden City just north of London having dinner with Robin Wood and his family, persuading him to abandon his teaching in the local grammar school to come out and join me at Queen's University in Kingston. That's how film appointments were made in those days!

And they were exciting days. Everything was just getting started and Robin came to virtually all my lectures, sometimes

disagreeing with me fervently, to the ecstatic delight of the students. When a change in Robin's domestic life catapulted him back to England, this time to Warwick University in Coventry, I visited him there and found him rather restless, largely because there was little for his partner to do in a town like Coventry. So when a job came up as Dean of Fine Arts in the old Atkinson College at York University, I suggested he apply and I brought him out again.

The rest is history. Loving him as a friend, I knew from the outset that Robin would contribute enormously to the discourse of film studies in this country; and this he has certainly done. To experience Robin discussing a film is not only to alter one's understanding of how films can be discussed but also of how they are related to the moral fabric of the social world.

Congratulations, Robin, at this moment of your roasting! I hope it's sufficiently rigorous that you might even be singed a little.

## BRUCE LaBRUCE

I'm very happy and honoured to be here today to celebrate the worldly incarnation of Mr. Robin Wood, a great writer, a fantastic teacher, and, to borrow a phrase from George C. Scott in Richard Lester's film *Petulia*, a beautiful human being. I felt compelled to work an obscure movie reference into the first sentence of my presentation because one of the first things I learned in Robin's class was that you must know your obscure movie references, or at least it helped you to get noticed. Please note that I didn't call it "obscure movie trivia", because the word trivia tends to trivialize movie trivia. And if you know anything about Robin's cosmology, you would know that in it there is nothing trivial about the movies. In fact, that's one of the first things I learned from him about film criticism: everything signifies something. Maybe I'll get into the Barthesian Codes or Christian Metz's Syntagmatic Relations a bit later—both of which, incidentally, I learned about for the first time in Robin's classes, notwithstanding his evident and sometimes indignant distaste for some of the more lurid and meretricious aspects of French Poststructuralism. Then again, I probably won't get into the Barthesian Codes or Syntagmatic Relations, because frankly, it's been a while. And as fond as I remain of hermeneutics and "la grand syntagmatique", I do like to consider myself a recovering academic.

Although I have a memory on a par with Guy Pearce's in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, I do remember the first time I walked into one of Robin's classes. It was a night course at Atkinson College that I was taking in my second year of the Film Program here at York; it was a Hollywood survey course; and the first movie of the year to be screened was a John Ford western—probably *My Darling Clementine*, if memory serves, which it often doesn't. I clearly recall my first impressions of Robin: that he was a strikingly handsome man—dare I say, a dashing fellow—with a slightly stuffy posh British accent which I immediately forgave him on account of his adorable stutter. Considering his Marxist sympathies, I don't think the posh



accent would have worked at all well without the stutter, which somehow aligned him in my mind more with Eliza Doolittle than with Professor Henry Higgins. Anyway, I remember in the discussion after his lecture about the movie, Robin asked the class if anyone knew the name of the actor who played Morgan Earp, the brother of Wyatt Earp, played by Henry Fonda. Although I was always loathe to speak out too much in class, I did pride myself somewhat on my knowledge of movie trivia—or untrivia, shall we call it—having been raised on Hollywood movies, so I put up my hand and gave what I was pretty confident was the right answer: Ben Johnson. Of course the correct answer was Ward Bond. But Robin told me that it was a perfectly respectable guess, and that encouraged me enormously.

Of course at that time I had little idea what I was getting myself into. I did have a bit of an entree with Robin from the start: my eldest sister was best friends at the time with Florence Jacobowitz, who was then in her first year of graduate school and one of Robin's star pupils. But regardless of your connections, you always had to stand on your own merits with Robin, and prove your pudding, as it were. I immediately started to study Robin's early, seminal books on the work of Arthur Penn, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, and Claude Chabrol, which dazzled me with their critical rigour and insight, and I began to familiarize myself with a little throwaway essay of his called "Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic", which was first published, I believe, in *Film Comment* magazine in 1978, a mere two years before I first met him. Having myself grown up on a farm, and having attended high school in a small town in Ontario in the seventies, I was still at the time in that half-closet-y dream state that some of you may be familiar with, so I have to give props to Robin for paving the way out of the closet for me—with a steamroller. Of course I wasn't married with three children, as Robin was when he publicly acknowledged his homosexuality, so it wasn't as difficult for me, but I was always impressed by the courage that it must have taken to act as he did in those circumstances so early on in "the movement", as we once called it, and to incorporate it aggressively and politically in his work. Robin was my first mentor as a gay activist, and helped to inaugurate what I always used to call my painful process of politicization, and I remain in my work today an activist of sorts owing to his early influence and example. And I do thank him for that. We were of course a little hotbed of political agitation up at Atkinson when we started our very own magazine of quasi-Marxist, full-on feminist film criticism, *CineAction!* I'm proud to have been on the original editorial collective of the magazine, which was comprised mostly of Robin and his graduate students. I have many fond memories of those times—from the usually relaxed, occasionally volatile—where's Kass Banning?—Sunday afternoon editorial meetings at Robin and Richard's apartment, to the actual production of the first dozen or so issues of the magazine, for which I literally cut and pasted the galleys alongside of Stuart Ross in the offices of the *Excalibur*. And then of course there were the occasional weekend parties, which are now, I'm sure, at least in our own minds, legendary. Let's just say I can never remember Robin and Richard running out of booze at a party, which is no small distinction.

It's impossible to do justice in a short speech to all the lessons learned and experiences gained from Robin, who has

always been so generous with his time, his expertise, and his spirit. If you looked up the word "largesse" in the dictionary, you might find Robin's picture beside it. I took courses with him for three years as an undergraduate, which included a phenomenal course on genre and a dazzling one on Japanese cinema, concentrating on Ozu, Mizoguchi, Kurosawa, and Oshima, which sticks with me still. As a graduate student I acted as an assistant-cum-projectionist for a couple of his classes, and he was the supervisor for my Master's Thesis, a shot-by-shot analysis of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. (To put this in antediluvian perspective, this was before the advent of VHS, so I had to use a special projector that allowed one to stop the frame in the gate to examine it without burning the film.) Most of the courses were at night, and I have fond memories of standing on the packed bus back down to the subway beside Robin after a long, exhausting day, still discussing film with unembarrassed enthusiasm.

In closing, I just want to thank Robin for being such a great role model for me, as corny as that may sound. First of all, I want to thank him for his glamour. I was always so impressed at seeing his book, *Hitchcock's Films*, immortalized in the film *Day for Night* as one of Truffaut's favourite books. This really made me want to be a published writer myself, and indeed Robin helped get some of my writing published for the first time, in *Movie* magazine. I was also impressed by Robin's stories of visiting Arthur Penn out west on the set of *Little Big Man*, or Martin Scorsese in New York on the set of *King of Comedy*, for which he scored a production assistant position for our fellow *CineAction!* alum, Lori Spring, which I was totally jealous of. Robin's love of cinema was so palpable and infectious, and it always included an appreciation of the people behind the films and the process of making them. I'm sure it was this enthusiasm that contributed to my becoming a film-maker myself after I left university. And finally, I just want to thank him for being such a great homo. He really provided me with an early example of the romance of homosexuality, and what a satisfying and rewarding experience it can be. And in a world in which gays aren't always treated with much respect or enthusiasm, that's a great lesson to learn. Thanks Robin.

## BART TESTA

*This text was prepared for the Robin Wood Roundtable at the Film Studies of Canada Conference held at York University in 2006. It was a very informal parade of gushing appreciations of Robin Wood. This text has been only lightly revised in the faint hope of de-gushing it.*

I have been reading Robin Wood's books and articles since I was a college student, reading them alongside those of Andrew Sarris, Jonas Mekas, Stanley Kauffman, and Susan Sontag. I felt at the time that these critics gave me a ringside seat on the rise of a new cinema, one of the most exciting things I then wanted badly to know about but scarcely understood. I still read a number of Wood's writings every year. Now that I am a college film instructor, I read Wood's writings with my students. I am absolutely sure that I am not alone among teachers in doing so.



There are some dozen books that Robin Wood has written, not counting the republished ones that are sometimes substantial expansions and revisions of earlier editions, like *Hitchcock's Films* and *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan*. There are also many articles and chapters in periodicals and collections, conference papers and lectures. His participation in the British magazine *Movie* and guiding hand at the Canadian *CineAction* have been crucial and formative.

The range of Wood's critical topics runs from Antonioni to the horror film, Scorsese to Bergman, classical Japanese films to American melodramas, German films and both the Rays, the American rebel and the Bengali master. I would suggest, as many have, that Wood was one of those film critics who spanned, at an important time, the considerable distance that we can now measure retrospectively between film criticism written in the format of journalism and cinema studies written in the drier form of an academic discipline. The journalistic side of his writing accounts for his prolific output over many years and the presence of his indelible personality. Wood early developed the working critic's habit of writing regularly which few tenured academics, whose writing must stand up—very slowly, and prepare to duck—under the hard scrutiny of peer review, have managed to cultivate. Given the sprawl of Wood's subject matter and his large output, there is no way to acknowledge the range of his publications, or their many particular contributions, or offer any especially useful assessment of their collected import, beyond my inclinations toward some blanketing assertions. So, let me lay out just three points.

The first is by way of a formal, institutional recognition—as yet not forthcoming with something like a proper *Festschrift*—of what the tribe of film teachers and critics must acknowledge: namely, Robin Wood got there first and did so often and repeatedly on assorted film-critical topics. There are not many critics who do this. Susan Sontag is another. In a famous instance of Wood's generation, a point on which Robin himself pointedly remarks in a published revisitation to Bergman's *Persona*, Sontag understood what Bergman's film signified, as she did Godard's project, and Bresson's style. But Sontag was, overall, unsympathetic to Bergman. One can understand why, given his customary layering of weighty symbols and the impasto of thick significance that lay over his films, she was a bit repelled. But Sontag appreciated the stripped down quality of *Persona*, which she took to be a refusal of any interpretation. The belated arrival of a laconic modernist cadence inside one of the most ambiguous and yet significant narrative filmmakers struck her as the important implication of *Persona*.

Sontag was only very selectively any kind of film (as opposed to literary) auteurist. Wood, writing almost simultaneously on Bergman, was a card-carrying one. Like his *Movie* colleagues, he participated in an "excitement" (the word Wood uses) of a discovery of the expanded field of meanings that was becoming available to filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s and no one more than Bergman illustrated. Wood's treatment of *Persona* was clearly a "reading" that centered on the film's troubled two characters and on what Bergman meant to say with them. What modern cinema's indulgence in ambiguity paradoxically stabilized in English-speaking film criticism, and

what it created for its context, and developed for its formative protocols, all came from just such an excited initiation into challenging tasks of interpretations of difficult movies. Wood's ethos was the humanist's interpretation-against-modernism, not Sontag's modernism-against-interpretation. But they shared an "excitement" over the same cinematic objects and the cultural novelty that arrived with them—a cinema that required the closest kind of attention.

Although there are degrees of this sort of thing, by which I mean the originality with which critics, in their excitement, framed such interpretative tasks, David Bordwell rightly characterizes the situation for criticism at the time describing when he writes,

**The interpreter's exemplar is a canonical study—and essay or book which influentially crystallizes an approach or an argumentative strategy. [Such a text] is frequently anthologized, widely taught and constantly cited. The exemplar instantiates what the field is about: if it is progressive, it shapes future work; if it has been superceded, it must still be acknowledged, attacked, quarreled with...academic critics write in the shadow of exemplars (*Making Meaning*, 25).**

Some twenty pages later in his *Making Meaning* Bordwell explains clearly how the *Movie* critics, and these include Paul Meyesberg, Ian Cameron, Richard Jeffrey, V.F. Perkins, and Robin Wood, achieved that kind of preeminence that goes with the writing of the "interpreter's exemplar." And Wood's interpretations were and remain exemplary. We tend to forget what Wood's book on Bergman meant to readers and critics in the 1960s. Perhaps because it has been eclipsed over time by his other books of that time—the ones on Hawks and Hitchcock—which represent an interpretive project to which Wood and cinema studies have alike remained committed and to which he himself regularly returned. Bergman's films now instead seem to belong to another kind, if not era, of film criticism that was not any longer to lie in Wood's—or Sontag's—future. I think many of Wood's writings have held the capacity of sometimes shaping future critical work, and when they do that "exemplary" shaping, they especially need and deserve to be "quarreled with."

The second point concerns a certain type of critic that writes—and really acts—in trust of his or her discernment. A critic can write exemplar-texts in more than one way. One type of critic instructs his or her colleagues by exemplifying the practice of criticism as an activity of discernment. This type of critic differs from another type, the type who propagates a doctrine or methodology, program or system of criticism, and who treats films in the main as textual illustrations. I have usually read Wood as the first type of critic: his sensibility, personality and discernment count for a great deal more than his system or doctrine. The two types of critic cannot, except very naively, be distinguishable in any absolute way. There are ideas and semi-systematic concepts in all critical writing however impressionistic. Without some large capacity for discernment, no systematic critic can be persuasive. Sometimes what makes the first kind of exemplar-critical essay or book important is the insight and interpretation that got it right the first time. Wood did this



when writing on Hawks and on other Hollywood directors, effectively co-generating an auteurist program for a range of American classical directors.

However, let me say that even when a somewhat older Wood was being much more programmatic, and his discussion of horror films in *The American Nightmare* and its satellite essays is the obvious case in point. Wood still discriminates among the films. Tobe Hooper or George Romero or David Cronenberg or Brian De Palma matter to him singly as directors almost as much as his Marcusian psycho-social interpretation of the symbolic substratum of the horror genre's cycle in the late 1960s-early 1970s. Although Wood's principle agenda was to intervene with an interpretation of horror movies of this period, (and he took the cycle to be, if not definitive, then at least climactic for the genre), he still required, for himself and his readers, that we discriminate films and directors—and this was a requirement laid down under tough circumstances. Where, after all, was one to see the differences between *The Exorcist*, *Carrie*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes* and *Shivers*? Well, Wood saw and located differences or persuaded us that he had. He furthermore made it an obligation that every critic do the same when talking about horror movies. So, quite aside from the catnip appeal of Wood's Freudian-Marxian interpretive grid for horror, held out to critics weary of laboring up the steep Lacanian incline hoping to get the politics of the shot-reverse shot (i.e., suture theory), here was hotter stuff to parse (Sex itself! Transgressions! Cannibalism! Repressive family values! Incest!).

Sensationalism is not, however, what made the essays in and around *American Nightmare* a founding moment in reformatting the horror genre; it was Wood's insistence on a genre with many individual distinguishable films, whereas previously there had been very few. Even though Wood's program was undeniably his crux of the matter—and his big slap shot into the gut of semiotic formalism into which leftist British film criticism kneaded itself since the 1970s—the reformatting the horror's interpretive template in cinema studies lies in discerning degrees of the films' singular own interventions and different inflections of horror's psycho-social implications. To all that Wood gave a novel program for the horror whose genre-durable appeal to film academics in an important sense came from both kinds of exemplary criticism embodied in a single writer.

The consequences of the differences that lay between discernment (even when mixed with a heady programmatic criticism) and method (by which I mean a method standing theoretically alone) should not be lost on us at a time when cinema studies have become so given to programmatic practices of interpretation that Bordwell refers to us collectively as "Interpretation Inc."

The differences within the discerning critic can be, however, paradoxical: on one hand, a kind of erotic engagement with film. Wood writing at top steam on Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* can stand as one instance (of many) of that erotic inclination in him. On the other, a constant moral scrutiny. These twin capacities—to enjoy deeply (and speak cogently of that enjoyment) and to judge ethically (and to show how this matters)—produce a tension and can protect a critical writer from the indulgence into which mere cinephilia can suck

him, and from the clever moral or political bromides that can easily be wrung from films under application of a few catch-phrases. Nowhere are these twin qualities better, more tautly, displayed than in Wood's books on Hawks and Hitchcock. But they are everywhere—for instance in the pieces on Godard's *Bande à part*, *Alphaville* and *Weekend*, and the seldom (and excellent) re-read essay on Makavejev's *Switchboard Operator*, and the better known article on *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.

It is alongside these qualities, which bind in an action which feels like virtue, however, that Wood's flaws as a critic are likewise displayed whenever the pleasure-ethical tension goes slack. His tendency to over-praise, sometimes like a defensive movie reviewer, in the midst of a close description of a film shows that critical rapture over a film's nuances is a tippy business. His lapses from ethical discrimination into thumpy moralizing manifest a peculiar schoolmarmish mistrust of his discernment. I am not now speaking about his later commitments to feminism and gay liberation. But earlier, for example, for him to protest in the face of the casual cruelties so naturally a part of Hawks' comedies, like *His Girl Friday*, as he does, suggests that Wood is not willing to admit, though he *must* have noticed this, that Hawks' mean cutting edges are as much part of the "vitality" of these comedies—a vitality Wood so admires—of the 1930s and of Hawks' young protagonists. Wood tellingly prefers the aging Hawks' later comedies, where I find an unattractive softening, sometimes even slackening, though they certainly manifest that other great Hawks theme for Wood, integration, or "integrity." It is the ethical theme, vitality the erotic one. (It never seems to have dawned on Wood, who cleverly put *Bringing Up Baby* beside horror films, that in the later Hawks, the leopard Baby would give birth to erotic monstrosities, the heroines of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *The Land of the Pharaohs*, films Wood dismissed as minor, and that Hawks put them closely beside *The Thing*.)

For another example, what Wood thinks Hitchcock *means* with *The Birds* is hard to believe (but Wood is sharp on the next one, *Marnie*), and even to try to explain *The Birds* in earnest is perhaps to miss in Hitchcock another more extreme case of cruel comedy than is to be found anywhere in Hawks. The world is just about coming to an end and the hero is still trying to work things out with Mom. At times, Wood's flaw, which is mostly a matter of his virtue suddenly taking on a foreign accent or a mis-chosen emphasis in his interpreting, can become a full-on lapse of a sensibility into categorical self-division. The essay on *Letter from an Unknown Woman* goes on for many excellent pages of analysis and description—Ophüls' delicate/tough film has never before or since been in such gentle firm hands—only to fumble toward the end into out-and-out political catechetics. Sometimes whole essays tumble this way, as does Wood writing on Martin Scorsese (in *Vietnam to Reagan*), despite his important (and still underappreciated) decision to target *The King of Comedy* as the key Scorsese text, which it could well have been in the early 1980s, if only we could remember Scorsese back that far.

The third point—on the consequences of the types of criticism—comes by taking notice of a classic dispute—between Wood and Peter Wollen on the matter of Hawks. Wood shows how the difference between discernment and system that I



have been belaboring here can sometimes work out. Wood's essay "Hawks De-Wollenized" (in *Personal Views*) is one the several pieces he wrote resisting the lures of *Screen* theory in the 1970s (this is before *The American Nightmare* offered an alternative), in this case responding to Wollen's (and Alan Lovell's) attempt to recast the auteur theory in structuralist terms. Wollen's success with this attempt, in one of the three essays comprising *Signs and Meaning in Cinema*, might have been short-lived (structuralist auteurism had the life span of a fruit fly) but it still contributed to that book's exemplary status. The object in question is the "Hawks text" and how it is to be constituted in a critical description. Wollen's purpose was largely methodological and systematic. Better than half the essay is devoted to John Ford, whom Wollen regards as a "richer" filmmaker, basically because there was more in his film to structure.

Structuralism promised to take us past critical discernment toward an objective criticism. As we know, that pretense did not fare well even in the shorter run but it was succeeded by other proposals that continued the intent to render film studies some kind of science. Wood's rejoinder to Wollen is both specific and general. The specific thing is his defense of Hawks' humane reputation, which he sees Wollen impugning. Wood undertakes especially to dispute the modeling of Hawks' ethical system that Wollen proposes—but does not quite notice he is proposing as an ethic. In accumulating the counter-examples that he does, Wood discloses that Wollen's veiled suspicion of Hawksian groups lies in the meaning he suggests through certain loaded terms—as "elite" or "exclusive," etc. The program of discerning binary oppositions Wollen develops results in a modeling of Hawks as a textual system or structure that makes Hawks seem at once brittle and atavistic, fascist and boyish at once. Although Wood was the first to organize Hawks' complicated, multi-genre output into two groups, comedy and drama, and Wollen was, in key respects, just elaborating on him in a structuralist fashion, Wood shows that the Hawksian groups are too variously made up, film by film, for Wollen's elaboration to stand scrutiny, so Wollen gets the Hawks ethic all wrong. For students—who will always prefer Wollen's diagram of Hawks to Wood's discernment of variables in the films themselves—the value of comparing the still close but competing claims in this dispute is considerable. I do not believe that Wood in any sense demolishes Wollen. However, the course correction he provides does show the advantage of taking up films and testing them singly before accepting any system-generated account of them.

In the end, on the more general side, Wood does not settle his beef with Wollen simply by showing that he has mismanaged his examples or that Wollen has done just because he covertly harbours a dislike of Hawks. Rather, Wood asks, are we interested in "abstractions that can be made from an artist's work or are we interested in works of art?" In his 1963 essay "The Structuralist Activity" Roland Barthes answered that question for a school of critics that was soon to grow very large: the art work is to be made into another kind of object, which Barthes calls a simulation. This is what Wood means by an abstraction. How Wood replies to such a proposal is to declare "for art [that is] concrete and specific." To get to the concrete requires the erotic engagement with films—but the moral rightness of an interpretation comes in the dedication to get the

artist's ethic right by doing so. Wood's presumption is that it is only through attention paid closely to the "vitality" of the films which dwell in "the concrete and specific" features of them that a critic finds the ethic. Such a searching and finding is what is a consequence of habitual discernment.

I am not sure whether Robin Wood would accept a word that I have written about him. I am not sure whether he still believes the same things in the writings I have mentioned or believes them the same way today. However, no one can miss the way he insists on his unchanging commitments in the fresh editions of his books. But he equally insists that he had added to these commitments. And of course he has. A lifetime given to the activity of criticism would have to result in an ongoing expansion of these—unless the writer has become a certain kind of academic critic. That fortunately has never happened to Robin Wood.

## JANINE MARCHESSAULT

I first met Robin Wood in 1983 when I came to York University in Toronto to pursue graduate studies. He taught a course called *The Structure of Film*. It was a fantastic seminar that included close textual analyses of such diverse films as *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Ophüls 1948), *Ugetsu Monogatari* (Mizoguchi 1953) and of course the major discovery for me and everyone in the class, *I Walked with a Zombie* (Tournier 1943). Each of these films was lovingly dissected, frame by frame, to reveal the inner workings and hidden structures that gave them their unique aesthetic force. Robin also insisted that Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1970) be read alongside the films as a means to engage the class in thinking about intertextuality, psychoanalysis, cultural codes and the nature of narrative. This was my introduction to a critical practice of reading the text that combined aesthetics, politics and cultural theory.

My remarks centre on the relationship between pedagogy and writing that Robin forged in his teaching and in his criticism. It is a relationship that has had a profound and lasting influence on me, as it has on so many of his former students. I will focus on two aspects of this relationship. The first is his commitment to a humanist criticism, and to a socialist politic (feminist and queer) that finds a place for the "recognition of individual skills, intelligence, emotion: a Marxism informed by feminism and the revelations of psychoanalytic theory".

What does this mean?

I believe that it was in *CineAction* #8 (1987) that Robin came out. He came out as a Leavisite, or rather a Leavisian since Leavisites, he would tell us, are a cult that clings too tightly to the word of the Father. The term "Leavisian" indicates a sympathy towards, but not strict adherence to, F. R. Leavis's most progressive and original insights. Interestingly, two of the greatest film critics working and teaching in English Canada today, Peter Harcourt and Robin Wood, and one of the most influential Canadian media scholars' Marshall McLuhan, were all educated at Cambridge and studied with Leavis. Each was influenced by the New Critics' stress on reading as a cultural practice. While



many have been critical of Leavis's approach to education as elitist, Robin is sympathetic to the idea that culture (literature for Leavis) requires training and an educated sensibility. For Leavis reading is a serious undertaking and Robin reminds us that three words: "seriousness", "intelligence" and "significance" are integral aspects of his critical practice, which links art to life. These words are also very close to Robin's own critical lexicon, lest we forget his landmark question early on in his career, "should we take Hitchcock seriously?" We know the answer, but this question does not receive a once a for all declaration. Rather the answer depends on the social reality, the context in which it is being posed.

In his essay "Leavis, Marxism and Film Culture", Robin calls attention to Leavis's commitment to a writing and reading practice that challenges the barriers between the classroom and the world outside. Leavis's major contribution to critical thinking was expressed in his project to transform the study of culture by emphasizing the present situation, one that is contemporaneous with the experiences of the student, with the educational institution and the social world. This approach to teaching means engaging directly with the context in which the culture being studied belongs. Thus, in a lecture or a piece of film criticism by Robin Wood, the spheres of the everyday, the political situation in all its multiple layers from the state of university teaching to magazine publishing in Canada, are part of reading the text. Like teaching, criticism is a pedagogical act of reading culture, of engaging one's mind with what is just beyond the window and of creating a community of writers who read. Leavis founded the important cultural journal *Scrutiny* that would extend his pedagogical practice to a larger reading public. Similarly, with a collective of sympathetic co-conspirators (many of them former students), Robin Wood was involved in helping to form the editorial collective of *CineAction!*, a magazine committed to radical film criticism. This magazine provided a place to debate, to present a diversity of film readings, and to express shared political interests. It is also a place for discovery, where one can write and read about small, overlooked, forgotten or 'neglected' films. *CineAction!* has also generously nourished a new generation of young film and media critics, often giving them their first opportunity to publish.

For Robin, the function of criticism at the present time should be to: "lead the sympathetic consciousness into new places" (Leavis) and this "involves a constant readiness to change and modify one's own positions as one's perception of human needs changes." (*CineAction!* 8, 1987) Here we can see the direct link between criticism and pedagogy at work. It is no exaggeration to say that Robin Wood's sensibilities (literally his sensory functions), his knowledge of film, music and cultural history are astounding. Trained to read film before the luxury of video and DVDs, his capacity to recollect large chunks of dialogue, visual sequences and blocking, his sensitivity to minute transitions in light and sound, his ability to detect nuances in narrative tone and affect, are unrivaled. There is only one way to describe sitting in a classroom with him or reading a piece of criticism by him. Whether it be an essay on his favorite Canadian film director, William MacGillivray, or a critical comparison between George

Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985) and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), the encounter is always challenging in very surprising and intellectually exciting ways. Evaluation is central to the practice of criticism and reflects upon the relation between art and life. Robin's teaching and writing are never predictable because he is open to the world and to the text in that world. This is of course, the mark of the "serious" teacher and critic: he takes risks, he takes you on unexpected journeys to discover marvels or pretentiousness in the detritus of ordinary or extraordinary culture. This puts him in a category with film critics and philosophers as diverse as Siegfried Kracauer, André Bazin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Peter Harcourt, Stanley Cavell, Richard Dyer and more recently, R. Ruby Rich and Slavoj Žižek. All of these writers and philosophers write through a pragmatics that is both deeply personal and committed to expanding the world through their writing on art and culture. Theirs is writing that enriches the public sphere by inviting a conversation that reaches backwards towards a history of writing and forward to consider what is of value and worth preserving in a common culture. They seek to educate, to share their own grounded experiences and analyses of films, theoretical and political frameworks and social contexts, while shunting criticism's institutionalization within academic and/or commercial forms of writing. Robin Wood's long time commitment to Adult Education reflects both his deep pedagogical commitment and his rejection of anything that is elitist (including culture). His creation of a Film Studies program at Atkinson College that was devoted to Adult Education at York University, his stubborn impatience with theorizing that abstracts experience from films (with too many footnotes that stray too far from the object of analysis), his sometimes less than polite interactions with me over what constitutes elite culture (we had many 'conversations' around certain kinds of experimental film and video art for example which he believed were purposefully obscure), are all reminders for me of an exemplary committed practice—the practice of assuming a certain responsibility towards culture.

I said that I would mention two aspects of Robin's practice as a teacher and critic that have influenced me. So far I touched upon the radical humanism behind his critical practice. The second aspect is much more ephemeral and personal. It is found in his deep love of cinema. This is not just a cinephilic love of cinema, which always seems to me to be mired in some sense of mastery, the specialist club that is often filled with macho snobbishness that is antithetical to the joy of collective spectatorship. Robin's love of cinema allows him to appreciate some of Hollywood's recent teen movies as well as the films of Ozu. He is able to accommodate different practices and to recognize in them a common political and aesthetic palette.

Robin introduced me to so many films, some of which lead me into new places, producing that change in consciousness that great works of art and great teachers accomplish. One such film continues to stand above the rest, and that is Jacques Rivette's *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974) which resulted in a short piece that was published in an early issue of this magazine (#2). I will be forever grateful to Robin for introducing me to this film, for our conversations around it, and for encouraging me to explore some its many enigmas.



# TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

## Some Tentative Responses to Directors I Value

ROBIN WOOD

I am not the ideal festivalgoer. So many of my friends and fellow critics seem able to cope, quite happily, with three or four films a day. Two is generally my limit. I can't come out of one movie and walk straight into the next. I need time to ponder, to relax, to make notes. And this isn't just old age, I've always been like that. And I begin by telling myself 'This year you really must search out new talent, look at films by people you've never heard of, use the programme...'. But the programme is in my case the opposite of helpful: it tells me that every film in the festival is one I absolutely must see and some kind of masterpiece (do the writers of the entries *really* believe this?). So I inevitably end up going to the films by directors I already admire, and whose films will eventually (perhaps!) appear on DVD. I'm not really complaining, just confessing. I don't see how a programme writer could tell me of a new film 'Don't expect a masterpiece, but it's interesting...', or 'The film is awkward and even slightly amateurish but it has a lot to say about some important issues...' (Actually, I think I would be far more likely to see the film if the blurb *did* say such things...).

So here, once again, is not a revelatory account of unknown masterpieces by unknown directors, but yet another celebration of the latest works of some of my favourite living directors.

### 1. SARAH POLLEY: *Away from Her*

Well, of course, Ms. Polley has not yet had the opportunity to become quite *that*, and, alas, one must immediately wonder whether, within the framework of Canadian film production and its shortsighted financing agencies, she ever will. My introduction to Sarah Polley was in a modest little Canadian film made many years ago and

never heard of since called *Joe's So Mean To Josephine*. The film was quite good but Ms. Polley was quite dreadful, self-conscious, overacting like crazy. But I've forgotten the film and never forgotten Sarah Polley. Inexperienced as she was, she had that mysterious thing called 'presence', the stuff that stars are made of. I started watching out for her. The clincher took some years to arrive: a film called *Guinevere*, a distinguished work that now seems to be as forgotten as *Joe's So Mean...*, though at least it came out briefly on DVD. Here there could be no doubt:

Sarah Polley could (and, in a different financing and promotion situation, would) have become a star of the magnitude of Hepburn or Bergman or at least, in more contemporary terms, Michelle Pfeiffer or Julia Roberts (I am not, of course, suggesting any direct comparison or likeness: Polley's 'star quality' is all her own). If you doubt me, get hold of the movie. So what happened? Apparently, zilch. Polley identified herself proudly as a Canadian, and made clear her quite explicit and outspoken connection to left wing politics, which also included *not* responding to the allurements of Hollywood (who at least can recognize a 'star' when they see one). But, eventually, to Hollywood she went—which tells you in a nutshell much of what is wrong, backward and incompetent in Canadian cinema. *Go* is a good little movie by an interesting (if clearly minor) director, Doug Liman, and Polley's performance is excellent. But apparently her experience of Hollywood filmmaking was (quite understandably) not to her taste, and she returned to Canada. She should have been welcomed with open arms and a whole armful of projects that might have interested her, but apparently zilch, once again. Since then she has been hovering about in the sidelines, accepting this or that but nothing of great consequence, trying Hollywood again very briefly (the 'sort of' remake of *Dawn of the Dead*), coming home to...? One would have hoped, to a large group of supporters working out with her and under her guidance passionately felt political projects, outspoken and anti-American, with herself as star, director, writer or whatever she wanted,

surrounded by strong, committed support. Yet there has been nothing here of consequence for her, as an actor.

She has always wanted to direct, and now has the opportunity, and her film has been, quite rightly, very well received. It is directed with great sensitivity, and it is clear that, a brilliant and charismatic actor herself, it is marvelously acted. If Julie Christie stands out it's because she has the showier role; Gordon Pinsent is her equal. I hope that dreadful tinkly-tinkly-tinkly, Oh isn't it sweet, Oh isn't it sad background music, obviously there to soften pain that shouldn't be softened, was imposed on Polley. I admire the film, and shall buy the DVD when it appears. Yet... is this the Sarah Polley of passionate and outspoken leftist views? She has expressed, in interviews, her own commitment to the film. But was it really her first choice as director? I would have (indeed, *had*) expected something quite different. The topic of Alzheimer's (and I certainly don't wish to belittle the suffering that term embodies—in my old age I sometimes think I suffer from it myself) is important but so *safe*. It has no political connotations whatever, it's as if the choice of this subject, as Polley's directorial debut, were a careful safeguard against her doing something really *dangerous* (which, in Canadian cinema, Heaven forbid! The last thing we must do is offend the USA, or indeed, to judge from most of the results, anyone else. Titillate, perhaps, but not *shock*). Was it really her first choice? I would have expected something more like *The Children of Men*, but more intelligently thought through.

But in any case, whatever she does, I wish her all good fortune. I've often considered asking her for an interview, but I'm very shy about such things: what right have I to take up the time of someone I greatly admire, who might have far more important things on her mind? What we need is a thorough overhauling of the entire business of Canadian film funding and of the people in charge of it, with a thorough investigation into how decisions are made, according to what criteria. My own opinion is that, with someone of Polley's undoubted and undeniable talent, intelligence and



Julie Christie in *Away From Her*





integrity both as star and director, she should be given *carte blanche* in anything she wants to do, within the limits of the available money, choosing her own writers and actors. But I've already said this or something like it so many times that it seems superfluous and slightly embarrassing to say it again.

## 2. JAFAR PANAHİ: *Offside*

*Offside* seems to have attracted little attention from my colleagues. Perhaps a film about a teenage girl trying to get in to a football match sounded a trifle trivial. But I would have thought Panahi's name would have been sufficient to attract lineups.

Why do national movements always seem to go in threes?—I think of Neo-realism (Rossellini, de Sica, Visconti); the *Nouvelle Vague* (Chabrol, Truffaut, Godard); and contemporary Iranian cinema (Kiarostami, Makmalbaf, Panahi)? The Iranian trio is especially fascinating because they appear to have developed *against*, rather than *with* the social background of which they are in some ways a product. The New Wave directors were welcomed in France with considerable enthusiasm and excitement; their Palestinian counterparts are greeted with death threats and bans. We in the West know nothing whatever of mainstream Iranian cinema (I am assuming there *is* one, and I wouldn't expect it to be very interesting). Presumably it produces harmless (i.e. reactionary) entertainment, with women kept firmly in their place. Not 'places': the implication seems to be that only one is available, and to describe it as 'servile' would be generous.

The relationship among the three directors seems more intricate than among the French New Wave, where all three were linked by their connections to *Cahiers du Cinema* and their devotion to Bazin, but where each went very much his own way. Makmalbaf appears, both in name and person, in a Kiarostami film (the magical, wonderful *Close Up*); Kiarostami writes the screenplay for Panahi's first feature *The White Balloon* (which bears a certain resemblance, in theme and structure, to Kiarostami's vastly superior *Where Is the Friend's Home?*), and Kiarostami is also credited with the screenplay for Panahi's suspiciously Panahiesque *Crimson Gold*, which goes, politically, further than the subtler and more circumspect Kiarostami has dared (but Kiarostami's whole programme is far more complicated, less directly and openly revolutionary, with his interest in aesthetics). The relationships seemed closer (understandably, the mutual support being of

great importance within so grotesquely reactionary a culture) than those of the New Wave, yet each swiftly established himself as a fully independent voice. Makmalbaf remains a relatively shadowy figure, moving from the early quasi-neorealist *The Cyclist* through 'period' films, to the strong but unsatisfying *Kandahar*.

The bitter irony is that, as far as one can gather, Panahi's films never reach the audience that most needs them, i.e. the Iranian general public. Look at the DVD of that emotionally devastating film *The Circle* (arguably his masterpiece to date), and you get a surprise right from the start: the opening credits are all in Italian. Apparently the film was never shown in Iran—it was flown out secretly to the Venice Film Festival, where it received (quite rightly) its top award, and the credits were added in there. I have not heard what happened to the marvelous *Crimson Gold* (also available on an excellent DVD), but I did hear a rumour that when it was screened in the Toronto Film Festival with Panahi present, his friends were urging him not to return to Iran, where he would probably be thrown into prison. The film's essential theme—the enormous gulf between rich and poor—could as easily apply to North America as to Iran, but in Iran, it seems, it cannot be uttered aloud.

Apparently Panahi was not thrown into prison on his return (or if he was he has been released). His new film, *Offside*, is fully characteristic, if more lightweight, returning to the theme of *The Circle* (the oppression of women in Iranian society) but with a buoyant, resilient and resourceful teenager replacing the tragic women of the earlier film, fighting not for her life but for her right to attend a football match. But is this really a trivial issue? In itself, Yes, in its implications, No. It can stand in for a great deal more. It would seem that, of all the forms of oppression in Iran, the oppression of women is the most extreme, along with that of gays (women, at least, are not put to death for being women, just subjected to every humiliation and allowed no rights). In my naivete I was astonished to learn that Kiarostami's *Ten* is also banned in Iran, presumably because it shows a woman whose marriage has recently broken up achieving self-definition, a process subtly and inexplicitly charted step by step through the film's ten sequences, in her encounters with her child, with friends, with a happy prostitute who apparently enjoys controlling any situations she might find herself in. The woman is, in effect, learning not to be a 'wife', or even an ex-wife, but to be a person. I suppose we must assume that *Offside*

is banned there too. If so, Iranians are being denied a great treat. The heroine's courage, resourcefulness and resilience, unashamedly celebrated by the film, offer an exhilarating experience. I can't hardly wait for the DVD, to see it again.

## 3. NURI BILGE CEYLAN: *Climates*

For the past three years I've had very bad luck with the Toronto Festival. For two years I was ill during it, and even briefly hospitalized during the 2005 screenings; this year the festival coincided with a commission from ARTFORUM for an article on Ceylan and, specifically, *Climates*, one of those 'offers you can't refuse', with a very short deadline. So I spent much of the festival dashing off to films I couldn't bear to miss then back home to my typewriter.

A few years ago in a previous festival, Ceylan was the subject of a short retrospective of his first three films (*The Small Town*, *Clouds of May*, *Distant*). They were clear evidence of a distinguished talent and of remarkable consistency: the same two leading actors appear in all three; in the second, one of them (Muzaffer Ozdemir) travels from the city to the country, in the third the other (Mehmet Emin Toprak) moves from the country to the city. All three films are centrally concerned with the city/country opposition. *Clouds of May* is a poignant lament for the destruction of the natural world by the infiltration of Big Business, with Ozdemir as a filmmaker returning to his village to film his father and mother (played by Ceylan's own parents); *Distant* has Toprak moving to the city to share Ozdemir's apartment, and is centrally concerned with his inability to adjust to city life and the two men's inability to adjust to each other. Toprak died in an accident shortly after the film was completed. I don't know how deeply this affected Ceylan's work, but *Climates* marks an abrupt shift in tone and subject-matter (one would not, I think, guess that it is the work of the same person) and an immense stride forward. I don't think 'masterpiece' is too strong a word. For a detailed account of the film I must refer readers to ARTFORUM, November 2006. Within the present limited space I shall simply consider the film's most remarkable feature.

The subject-matter is new in Ceylan's work: the study of a failed marriage, probing deeply and quite mercilessly into the problems of gender relations in the contemporary world. Though the husband is never made monstrous, retaining a certain degree of sympathy throughout (he clearly sees himself as a good husband, quite unable,



because of his upbringing within a sexist culture, to recognize that at every point he is treating his wife as a secondary and inferior person), the film's sympathies are unambiguously on the side of the wife. What makes the film unique is that Ceylan himself plays the husband and Ebru Ceylan (his wife in real life) plays the wife (Ceylan's parents also appear, once again, in small character parts, as the husband's parents). There have been numerous films (by Fellini, Cassavetes, Godard...) in which a director has directed his wife or 'domestic partner'. The only prior instance I can think of where a husband has directed his wife and himself playing husband and wife is the final episode in the portmanteau New Wave film *Paris vu par...*, with Chabrol and Stephane Audran. But that is a very different affair: they are playing a monstrous and grotesque bourgeois couple, and playing them (until the payoff) for uneasy laughs. I am not suggesting that Ceylan has made some kind of pseudo-documentary about his own marriage. The film's intelligence is manifested in its critical distance, its insights into the importance of apparently trivial moments, in the subtlety of its detail. Very few films have examined modern marriage in the aftermath of the women's movement with such precision and intelligence.

**4. TSAI MING-LIANG:** *The Wayward Cloud; I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*

I'm cheating a bit here. *The Wayward Cloud* was screened in the 2005 festival; I missed it through illness. I've only recently caught up with it, courtesy of a Taiwanese filmmaker who was so kind as to send me a DVD of outstanding quality, which even has English subtitles. I assume that the reason we have been denied such a privilege (all Tsai's previous films are available here on DVD) is that it was probably among the ten most loathed films in any Toronto festival to date (though it already had a few bold defenders). Only an eccentric like myself seems willing to risk the ruin of his reputation by taking the film seriously and even expressing an admittedly not unreserved admiration for it. It is very much a Tsai film: it can't be dismissed as some unfortunate aberration. It is thematically consistent (as a person's nightmare can be consistent with his troubled dreams) with Tsai's earlier and subsequent work, stylistically recognizable, with obvious links back to previous films as well as forward to the new one, and it has an air of total confidence in what it is doing. Perhaps Tsai might say, as Vaughan Williams said on first hearing his fourth symphony performed, 'I don't know if I like it, but it's

what I meant'. As I am about to wrestle with another 'offer I can't refuse' from ART-FORUM, for an article on *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, a film that largely lacks the problems of *The Wayward Cloud* and is clearly among Tsai's finest, most fully achieved works, I want to concentrate here on the earlier problem child, to see what can be salvaged. Actually, rather a lot; after three viewings (the first, I must admit, mildly traumatic) I have come to admire the film, and even enjoy it.

The musical numbers aside, it is very much a Tsai Ming-Liang film (and even the musical numbers have their antecedents, in *The Hole*). Stylistically, it is very Tsai indeed: long-shot, long takes, long silences. From the outset Tsai's work is marked by a tendency (very un-Hollywood) to show an action in its completeness, starting where it begins and ending when it finishes, with any 'dead' moments when nothing is happening left in. Even medium close-ups are rare. The ultimate Tsai shot (though somewhat atypical in camera distance, a medium- rather than long-shot) is the (almost) ten-minute take of Lin (her surname, the only one we are allowed to know) weeping on the park bench at the end of *Vive l'Amour*, forcing us to experience duration in time with the character (unless, like some with whom I have experienced the film, we get up and walk out, the commoner response being nervous giggles), carrying to its extreme Tsai's obsession with challenging the audience by making duration unendurable, a trait I have attempted to emulate with this sentence... But it is easier, for ten minutes, to empathize with a woman's misery than to watch a man fucking a woman's dead body while being filmed for a porn movie (and there, I've given away *The Wayward Cloud's* ending...). The opening shot is characteristic Tsai at his most challenging (nothing whatever, in Hollywood terms, happens in it) and can be seen as the epitome of his style and thematic. We are inside an architecturally cold and sterile building, the camera placed (in long-shot) at the point of convergence of two corridors. At first the building appears empty. We look at it, we wait. Then a woman appears, right of screen, extreme long-shot, and walks towards the point of convergence, then turns right into the other corridor, where a second woman has appeared. We watch them (no cut of course) walk toward each other, then pass. No word is exchanged, neither appears to acknowledge the other's presence (or, indeed, existence) in any way. And no, it doesn't turn out later that they hate each other and are deliberately snubbing each

other: the one shot establishes the world to which we are headed.

Alienation was Tsai's central theme from the start (see his first feature, *Rebels of the Neon God*, through the first clear statement *Vive l'Amour*, to the more overtly political/ecological, end-of-the-world *The Hole* to the qualified desperation of *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*). *The Wayward Cloud*, set in some unspecified future, carries this to its extreme, substituting drought for the endless rain of *The Hole*. Human communication has become minimal, sex has lost any remaining vestiges of tenderness, reciprocity, emotion, and even (apparently) pleasure, reduced to ever more perverse rituals (sex with a watermelon, sex with a dead body, coldly filmed for television...). The purpose of the musical numbers is (to me at least) mysterious: determinedly hectic but quite lacking the sense of celebration and release that was the typical function of the musical number in Hollywood cinema, they come across as merely crude and mechanical—alienated energy, perhaps? There is however one exception: the very first number stands at the opposite pole from all the later ones: slow and yearning (as against determinedly energetic), solo (as against crowds of dancers), darkly lit (as against the generally garish sets and costumes of the rest), set in an expanse of water (as against the bottled water that appears to be the only remaining moisture of the film's 'world'). It is performed by a semi-human being, a young man with fish scales over parts of his body and the bony crest of the triceratops along his spine: humanity emerging from the sea and passing through the prehistoric period, filled with longing: searching, at the beginning of human time, for all that the present of the film has lost.

The film strikes one at first as a slide into the area of the pornographic. But it is actually *anti*-pornographic: Tsai makes it (I assume) quite impossible for anyone but an extremely sick person to 'get off' on any of the film's sex scenes, each of which is built upon the *denial* of pleasure for the viewer or satisfaction for the participants. One might even suggest that in this it comes close to being puritanical (the real reason why so many people unreservedly hate it?). What we are shown is sex without passion, without pleasure, without love, until the film's final moments. The very least one can say about the ending is that it is quite exceptionally audacious: the leading character (Lee Kang-Sheng of course, as always in a Tsai movie) struggling to 'come' for the porn filmmakers' camera while fucking a woman's dead body, is confronted by the







woman with whom he has previously had a virtually silent, non-sexual relationship and achieves the one pleasurable and fulfilling sex act in the film. Accuse Tsai of almost anything, but not of a lack of nerve. I find that ending extremely moving, perhaps because it makes this the only Tsai film with a happy ending.

I met Tsai briefly during the festival (unfortunately long before I got to see *The Wayward Cloud*), courtesy of my friend Aysegül Koc, who was interviewing him and invited me along. I was allowed to ask one or two questions and he gave me a big hug. I had no sense that he knew my work or had read my writings on his films. His warmth and spontaneous friendliness seems in retrospect to place *The Wayward Cloud* in a different perspective, as a work of desperation by a decidedly unalienated human being who genuinely cares about what is happening to our civilization and our planet.

#### 5. SPIKE LEE: *When the Levees Broke*

**'Where—is—my—government? I am SO disappointed...'**

—One of the interviewees in Spike Lee's film

As a film critic I have seldom ventured into the area of documentary, but within the past decade such a venture has come to seem increasingly obligatory. With the world we live in today, documentary (with the accent on protest) is assuming an ever more important and urgent role in filmmaking. Lee's film is magnificent, its four-hour length fully justified. I shall not attempt to analyze it. I want instead to talk around it. A directly political film demands a directly political response. I am no politician but there are things that must be said.

First: with the scandal of the virtual destruction of New Orleans, and the abject failure, both before and after, of the present government to act, why hasn't President Bush, and his entire team, resigned? How can he continue to face the public? Has the man no shame? I have, personally, nothing against him. In fact, I am even a little sorry for him. Every time he makes his appearance on my TV screen, I think to myself, 'If they hadn't elected him President he might have been rather a sweet, gentle little guy'. Perhaps he also thinks something like this, sometimes. And after all, his election was dubious. What I cannot understand is, *Why* did they make him President and *why*, above all, did he actually believe he could fill such a role? In his appearances on TV he looks like a nice, ignorant, nothing-much-but-who-isn't kind of guy, and I feel a little sorry for him personally, on the grounds

that, if somewhere in the future he wakes up screaming every night, he did his non-existent best. I don't think he deserves the eternal damnation he appears to believe in, but then I wouldn't wish that on a pig.

No, the problem is not President Bush, it is the astonishingly vast number of the inhabitants of the USA who actually voted for such a President. Admittedly, they aren't given that much choice. Are the entire American public so mystified that all they think of (with the end of all life on our planet at stake—the Louisiana disaster may be just the beginning) is 'Well, he looks a decent, harmless sort of guy, and after all, his father...'. And for some, I suppose, the Religious Right, in all its absurdity and ugliness, lends this some kind of credence: perhaps, with the threat of eternal damnation in the background, life on earth may as well come to an end and the good guys can all go to heaven.

My own opinion (for what it's worth, I am no politician): The United States government and its antique electoral system is now so discredited that not only should Bush and his cronies be forced to retire immediately (Lee's film, and a number of the interviewees, certainly if implicitly suggest this, and I myself cannot understand why he hasn't), but there should be something of a revolution (not, one hopes, a violent one) in the very *form* of government. The old bogymen of Stalinism, which has by now surely fulfilled its function as an 'awful warning', must be finally discredited, and a new socialism developed, with all the necessary safeguards. There are, after all, models other than that of Soviet Russia that have worked more or less successfully if unevenly. Britain has a strong socialist party (or it was until Tony Blair corrupted it, a development that can surely be reversed at the next election); Sweden has been a socialist country for many decades; Canada has its own NDP. None of these can stand as a model; none seems, at present, able to cope intelligently, swiftly and effectively with the catastrophe of global warming; all three need drastic rethinking. A socialist government would be precisely the 'government of the people, by the people and for the people' that Abraham Lincoln proposed a great many years ago, but which has never come into full existence, perverting itself into a 'government of the people by the rich and for the rich': a government that would never have allowed the Louisiana disaster to happen, a government that would outlaw Big Business and set seriously about the task of pushing back global warming. Who in America has the guts to be the founder of such a party? A more

worrying point is the question of how such a party could be democratically elected. The vast majority of the population seems to be kept in a state of continuous mystification, fobbed off with 'all the latest' largely useless and expendable gadgetry and 'entertainments'. And there is the question of finance. Where would the funding come from? The two current parties (both essentially right wing, one far more to the right than the other) depend upon the major corporations for a great part of their funding. With global warming, every corporation is under threat, but they could hardly be counted upon to fund their own demise.

People today seem to be treating global warming and the destruction of the environment as a great surprise, as if it had just been drawn to their attention, but scientists predicted it all many years ago. Even I myself, never very quick off the mark, wrote about it quite passionately in the new prologue to the revised *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, published in 2003. The book was well received but no one took up the particular issue (after all, a film critic is supposed to write about films). Why the big surprise today? Surely no one doubts that the New Orleans catastrophe was the result of global warming?—except, perhaps, President Bush, who is on record as saying that he doesn't believe in it. The result of which is what Spike Lee's film so movingly and intelligently dissects.

And yes, I know I have gone far beyond my task of covering a film festival. But I believe what I have said is implicit in Spike Lee's magnificent, fearless, passionate film.

## Master Classes

DE OLIVEIRA'S  
*BELLE TOUJOURS*  
AND VON TROTTA'S  
*I AM THE OTHER WOMAN*

RICHARD LIPPE

Each year the Toronto International Film Festival screens several hundred films, features and shorts, within the space of a week. While I like the fact that so much is available, it becomes very difficult to select which films to attend. In the course of the 2006 festival, I saw a number of excellent works by filmmakers whose work I know:





Katja Riemann as Carlotta in *I Am the Other Woman*

Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Climates*, Benoit Jacquot's *L'Intouchable*, Jia Zhang-ke's *Dong*, Abbas Kiarostami's *Roads of Kiarostami*, Jay Rosenblatt's *Afraid So* and Tsai Ming-liang's *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*. In addition I was introduced to the work of Christoph Girardet and Matthias Muller; *Kristall*, which consists solely of mirror shots taken from Hollywood and European feature films, is fascinating, illustrating the many ways in

which a mirror reflection can be used to comment on its subject and, by extension, the film's thematic. Yet the films that gave me the most pleasure were Manoel de Oliveira's *Belle Toujours* and Margarethe von Trotta's *I Am the Other Woman*. De Oliveira conceived *Belle Toujours* in admiration of Luis Bunuel and Jean-Claude Carriere and their 1967 film *Belle de Jour*. Although von Trotta may not have undertaken *I Am the*

*Other Woman* expressly because of its connections to *Vertigo*, she has crafted a film that unequivocally demonstrates the impact Hitchcock's film has had on her. De Oliveira and von Trotta prove themselves to be worthy of the artists they so lovingly evoke. The rewards of watching *Belle Toujours* and *I Am the Other Woman* are twofold, appreciating the films in their own right and as creative tributes to great filmmakers.





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A word of caution: if you don't want to know about the plots of these films, stop reading.

### **Belle Toujours**

In the 70 minute *Belle Toujours*, which de Oliveira wrote and directed, Michel Piccoli reprises his role of the worldly Henri Husson and Bulle Ogier replaces Catherine Deneuve as Severine, who in *Belle de Jour* is the young and sexually repressed wife of one of Henri's best friends, Pierre/Jean Sorel. The setting of de Oliveira's film is present day Paris and the premise is simple: Henri, attending a classical music concert, spies Severine in the audience and decides to contact her. Henri and Severine haven't seen each other since they parted thirty-nine years ago as he was about to inform Pierre of Severine's secret afternoon life as a brothel prostitute. (Pierre, blind and crippled, didn't know that the man who shot him was a jealous client of Severine's). As Severine leaves the concert hall, she recognizes Henri, but, instead of acknowledging him, flees. Henri is determined to catch her and, after several failed attempts, does so and gets Severine to agree to attend a dinner at his hotel. She agrees on the condition that he will tell her whether or not he told Pierre about her double life.

As the above description of *Belle Toujours* indicates, its pleasures involve a familiarity with and appreciation of the Bunuel-Carriere film. On the other hand, de Oliveira's film has its own distinctive identity. For instance, the tone of *Belle Toujours* is playful and affectionate whereas *Belle de Jour* is more sombre and disquieting. While de Oliveira provides his film with surrealist elements—the premise itself utilizes the notion of chance, Henri's hectic pursuit of Severine suggests a classical Hollywood madcap comedy, Bulle Ogier, to evoke Deneuve's Severine, wears an ill-fitting blonde wig, the dinner ends with the appearance of a live rooster in the hallway as seen through the opened front door of Henri's hotel suite immediately after Severine, in exasperation, has bolted out of the room—he isn't interested in using surrealism, as did Bunuel and Carriere, as a means to acknowledge the unconscious. In fact, *Belle Toujours* strikes a tone that is more akin to the absurdity that underlies *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), another Bunuel-Carriere collaboration. (*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, in addition to featuring both Piccoli and Ogier, contains a wickedly funny performance by Ogier. In *Belle Toujours*, Ogier again utilizes her comic skills, making Severine somewhat cartoon-like with furtive movements and a

sour look on her face. The character, as conceived by de Oliveira, is a bit foolish in the extremities of her behaviour.)

De Oliveira sets a leisurely pace for *Belle Toujours* with its opening sequence. Before the narrative begins, the viewer is given a substantial amount of the concluding movement of a Dvorak symphony. Throughout the film, he employs long takes; most striking, there are several long distance shots of Paris at night that are held much longer than needed to indicate a change of time and location. These long take shots, which are accompanied by background music, are beautiful in their own right but, then, Paris, whenever it's shown in *Belle Toujours*, is a place of elegance and beauty. This is reflected in the bar Henri frequents, the hotel Severine stays at, and the daytime views of the boulevards of the city. The vision of Paris offered complements the cosmopolitan and debonair Henri, who, unlike Severine, remains self-possessed and graceful whatever the circumstances. The film's pacing, which is uncharacteristic of most contemporary films, serves to call attention to the filmic processes itself, but it also functions to induce viewer anticipation.

Anticipation is constructed in great part around Henri's quest to meet with Severine, making Henri, not her, the film's central protagonist. On the other hand, Henri isn't an identification figure; for instance, in his several dialogues with the bartender about Severine and the past, he doesn't give us a clear motive for his strong desire to reconnect with her. Still, Henri, as embodied by Michel Piccoli, is the film's source of charm and energy. *Belle Toujours*, while a tribute to Bunuel and Carriere, also manages to be a tribute to Piccoli, a previous collaborator of de Oliveira's (*I'm Going Home*, another film about confronting the past) and an icon of the French cinema. With *Belle Toujours*, de Oliveira provides the actor with a role in which he can fully display his wit, intelligence and a physical attractiveness that is undiminished by age. At one point in their dinner conversation, Henri tells Severine, without further explanation, that he has become an alcoholic (and we see Henri drinking liberally while he talks to the bartender) but he isn't presented as an unhappy figure. In contrast, Severine wants to eradicate her past and says she is contemplating entering a convent to atone for her life. Severine also makes it clear, in her unwillingness to engage with Henri (she is annoyed when he presents her with a little box that emits a buzzing sound when opened), that she finds him, as she did in the past, unappealing. In *Belle de Jour*, Bunuel and Carriere construct a strong

bond between Pierre, Severine and Henri. While Severine actively indicates her dislike of Henri, in her imagination and/or dreams, he is a participant in fulfilling her masochistic fantasies, providing Pierre with the inspiration to enact Severine's wishes. (In *Belle de Jour*, there is a scene in which Severine and Henri, while sitting at a table in a restaurant with their respective partners, disappear under the table presumably to have sex. As the film gives the viewer access to only Severine's unconscious, the scene illustrates her desire for Henri, a desire that is mutual.) It is Henri who tells Severine about the brothel she eventually works at and, as she realizes, he understands her and her needs in a way that Pierre never could. Henri, talking about Severine to the bartender, says that her sexual needs are intimately connected to transgression and guilt and were nourished by her secret existence as a prostitute. In effect, Henri and Severine have remained closely bound together; and, it is he alone who can answer the question that has tormented her for the last thirty-nine years.

The film's concluding segment is the intimate dinner Henri and Severine have in his apartment. Up to this point in the film, de Oliveira employs a 'realist' aesthetic, shooting primarily on location; with the dinner scenes, the film becomes decidedly theatrical in nature. (Curiously, the hotel room with its damask wallpaper and plush furnishings looks as if it might serve as an entrance room in a high-class brothel.) To begin, manservants arrive to set up the dining table, with the suggestion that the room itself is a stage that is being readied for a performance. Once Severine arrives, after briefly exchanging greetings, the two sit down to eat and are served an elaborate dinner consisting of numerous courses which they consume in silence. As the meal progresses, their unconventional behaviour produces a slightly absurd situation. By the time Henri initiates a conversation, the desert is being served. Severine, in response, cuts short his attempts to be social; instead, she demands to know if he told Pierre about her secret life. Henri responds by saying the options are simple, either he did tell him or he didn't. Severine, outraged by his playful and evasive reply, gets up and walks out of the apartment. Her reaction initially shocks Henri, but then he begins to laugh. Henri's laughter affirms the absurdity of the dinner and, simultaneously, de Oliveira wittingly makes his point: nothing has changed. For Severine, true to herself, Henri remains the sadist (and he has, intentionally or not, fed her masochism.)

It is not just that de Oliveira has provided *Belle de Jour* with a coda that is in keeping



with its spirit that makes his film so appealing. *Belle Toujours* is an intelligent, precise and elegant piece of filmmaking. In addition the film conveys a genuine affection for its subject matter which encompasses Bunuel, Carriere, Paris, Piccoli, *Belle de Jour*/Severine, the cinema itself. And, finally, *Belle Toujours* is as life affirming as it is celebratory.

### ***I Am the Other Woman***

Margarethe von Trotta's reputation has been built on a number of political films, mainly those dealing explicitly with 20th Century Germany. Although set in present day Germany, *I Am the Other Woman* isn't an investigation of German history and politics. The film is based on a book by Peter Marthesheimer who, in collaboration with Pea Frohlich, wrote the film's screenplay. Marthesheimer was a close collaborator of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's and he and Frohlich wrote the scripts for three of Fassbinder's major works: *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Lola* and *Veronika Voss*. Like those films, *I Am the Other Woman* is, as the title suggests, about a woman's identity and a melodrama.

*I Am the Other Woman* is centred on a youngish woman who has a dual personality: Carolin Winter/Katja Riemann, a successful lawyer with a reserved demeanour and Carlotta (also played by Riemann), an aggressive prostitute who bluntly propositions men in public and is unrestrained in her sexual encounters. A young engineer, Robert Fabry/August Diehl, arrives in Frankfurt late at night on a business trip and checks into an elegant hotel where he encounters Carlotta, who is being asked to leave the premises because of her disruptive behaviour in the lobby. Robert, on an impulse, rescues her, taking Carlotta to his room where she immediately sets up the financial conditions of their sexual transaction. The next morning, when Robert awakes, he discovers she has already left; later that day, at his business meeting, he is introduced to Carolin who, when he questions her about their night together, denies ever having met him. Soon after, Robert discovers that Carolin and Carlotta are the same person; later, he learns that her split personality is due to her relationship with her overbearing father, Karl Winter/Armin Mueller-Stahl, who dominates not only his daughter but his entire household which consists of a wife (played by Karin Dor, unforgettable in Hitchcock's *Topaz*), a personal secretary and mistress, Miss Schafer/Barbara Auer, and a mute steward, Bruno/Dieter Laser, Mrs. Winter's lover.

Essential to the relationship between Carolin/Carlotta and her father is that she has never resolved her youthful desire-love for him; as a result, she has become the 'good' girl, who wants to please her father and the 'bad' woman, who, like Miss Schafer, is self-possessed, desirable and sexual. (Winter, who owes a vineyard, is confined to a wheelchair because of an accident that occurred when a young Carolin, dressed in a seductive manner, interrupted him and Miss Schafer who were having sex in the wine cellar.) *I Am the Other Woman* isn't a psychological study nor is it concerned with the clinical aspects of multiple personalities. Instead, the film is centred on Robert's growing commitment to and love for Carolin/Carlotta, the conflict that this produces for her and the threat Robert poses to Karl Winter whose relationship with his daughter is based on egoism and possessiveness.

In the film's press kit, von Trotta says she doesn't see the material as being specifically German in its concerns. Yet it isn't difficult to conceive of the Winter family, including Miss Schafer and Bruno, as a contemporary manifestation of Nazi culture, particularly in regard to the authoritative father and Carolin's concept of sexuality-love which is either 'pure' or decadent. Interestingly, in von Trotta's *The German Sisters*, aka *Marianne & Juliane* (1981), one daughter, who makes herself the father's favourite, grows up to be a terrorist while the other, in adulthood, channels her political energies into feminism. *The German Sisters* and *I Am the Other Woman* both employ, in the construction of their respective female protagonists, the notion of the doppelganger; and, with the latter film, von Trotta privileges an expressionist aesthetic. *I Am the Other Woman*, with its fluid camera movements, selective color schema, exotic settings such as the sequence that takes place in Morocco, and a dramatic score, is a highly stylized film despite being extensively shot on location.

Von Trotta, also in the press kit, in describing the film, says "...it's a story about love, an obsession, a passion....It's a bit like Hitchcock's *Vertigo*....It's somewhat inspired by that film." The two films share a number of narrative concerns: Robert, like James Stewart's Scottie, falls in love with the heroine and thinks he can save her from her destiny; Robert is involved with another woman, Britta/Bernadette Herwagen, who, like Barbara Bel Geddes's Midge, loves the hero but, with her practical mind and maternal attitude, fails to fulfil his romantic needs; Karl Winter, while less calculating and deceptive than Tom Helmore's Gavin Elster, is, like him, monstrous; and, arguably,

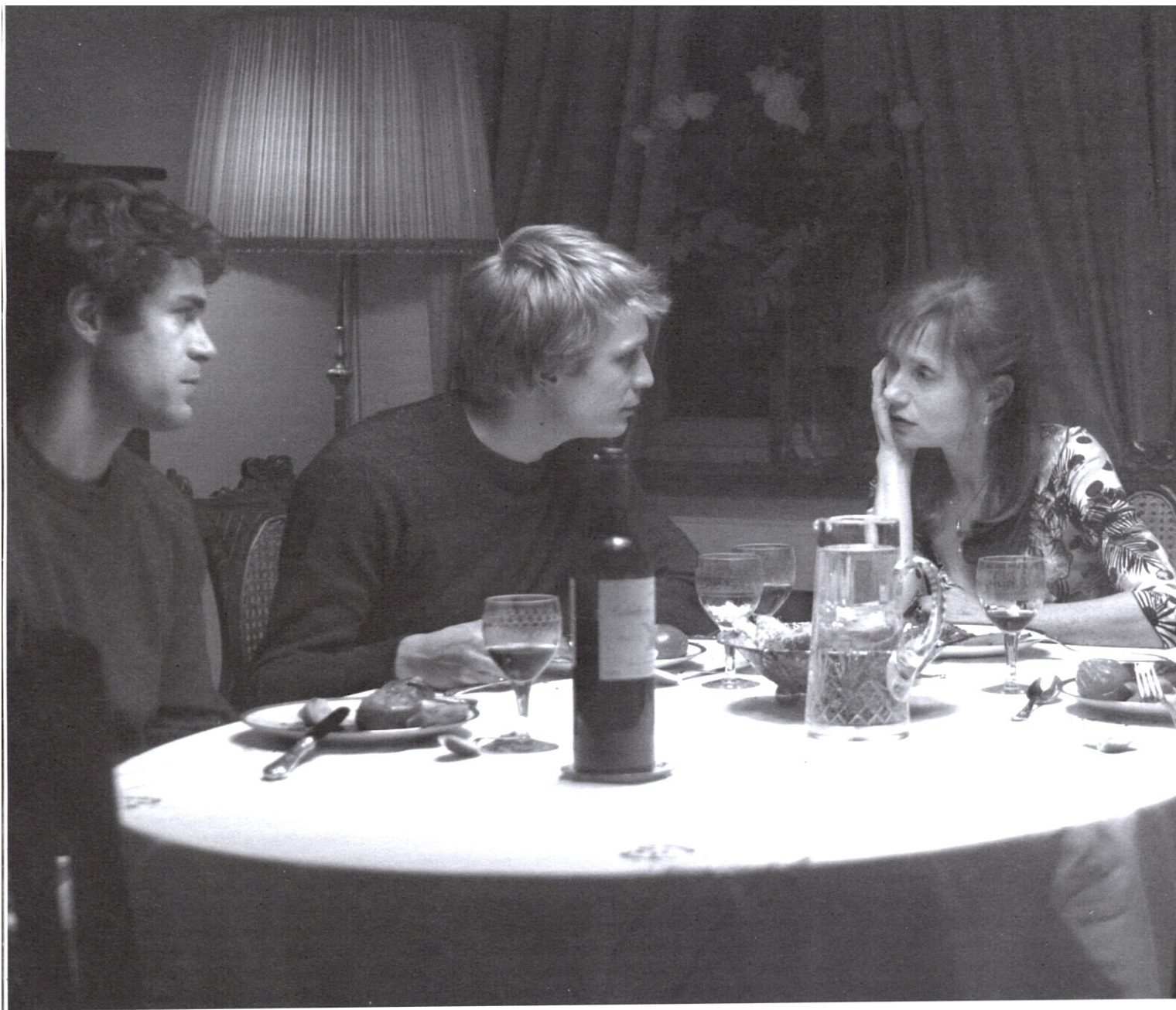
both films have lapses in narrative plausibility. At the same time, von Trotta's film has marked narrative differences from *Vertigo*: Carolin/Carlotta, unlike Kim Novak's Madeline/Judy, is genuinely a split personality and both Robert and Carolin/Carlotta are obsessive in their respective commitments, Robert to her and she to her father. Robert's initial attraction to Carlotta is purely sexual. His intense desire to have sex with her again the following night suggests that she has ignited his sexual desires. Yet, on gaining a complete understanding of her identity, he accepts the total woman. In this respect, the film radically departs from *Vertigo*. But, like Hitchcock's film, *I Am the Other Woman*'s concerns are patriarchy and gender politics. And both films, in dealing with love and obsession, move towards death.

*I Am the Other Woman*, again like *Vertigo*, is a work that depends heavily on visual storytelling to achieve its full effect. Von Trotta's emphasis on stylization begins with the credit sequence; it features a bright red sheer cloth background over which the camera tracks to the accompaniment of unsettling music. As the viewer soon discovers, it is Carlotta's red dress that appears in the credit sequence. Throughout the film, von Trotta is very sensitive in her use of color to suggest mood and characterization. For instance, in the sequence in which Carolin, conflicted about her commitment to Robert, flees to Morocco, she is seen initially wearing a red cape (Carlotta); later, Carolin having reconciled with Robert, wears a blue cape. The color blue reappears in the film's epilogue: Robert, positioned against the backdrop of a body of water, in voice over narration acknowledges death and survival and his realization that each of us harbours a number of personalities. (Florence Jacobowitz has pointed out that in the festival's catalogue the film's German title is *I Am the Other*, a title more in keeping with the film's concerns.) In *I Am the Other Woman*, von Trotta's use of the color red is masterful, comparable to its usage in the works of Hitchcock and Nicholas Ray.

*I Am the Other Woman* creates a narrative 'reality' that is, like *Vertigo*'s, both familiar and strange. The film is elusive, poetic and elegiac. It contains highly accomplished performances by Katja Riemann and Armin Mueller-Stahl but, arguably, the film's finest performance is given by August Diehl. He projects both an intelligence and a physicality essential to the film's meditation on desire and the erotic.

*I Am the Other Woman* is in debt to *Vertigo*, but Margarethe von Trotta has made a film that has a beauty and power of its own.





## ***Nue Propriété* with Isabelle Huppert**

FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ

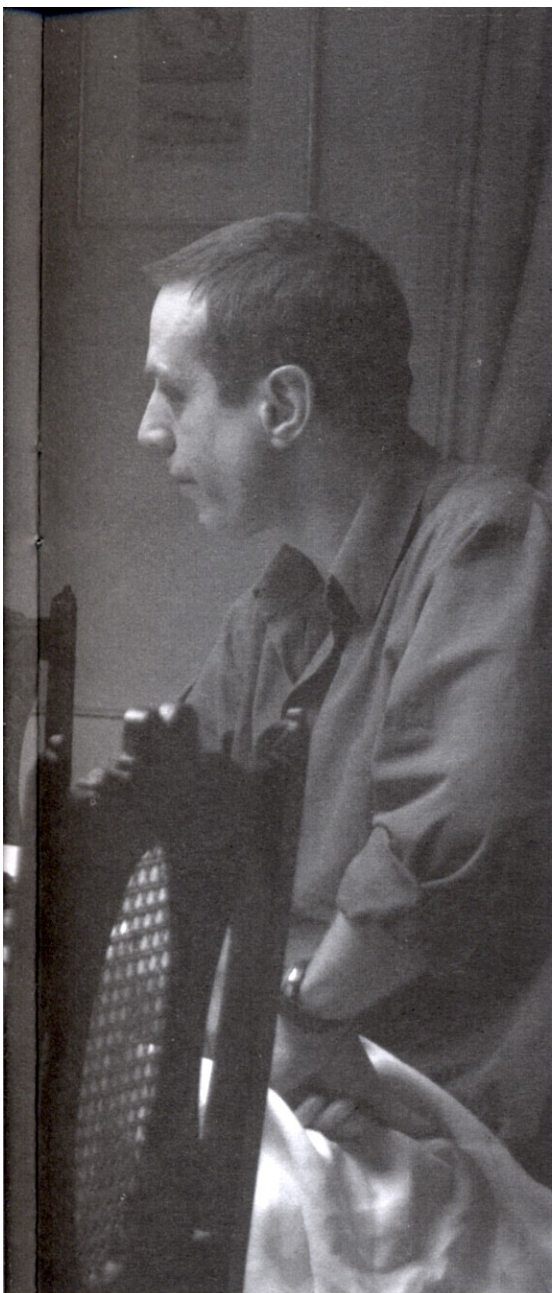
TIFF offers a daunting number of films and it can be overwhelming trying to choose which films to attend. Most often I rely on the name and reputation of a director; I always look forward to the latest work by Claude Chabrol, Claire Denis, Michael Haneke, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, Manoel de Oliveira, Jia Zhang-ke, amongst

others, and that way, even the films that aren't completely wonderful are usually worthwhile. I rarely choose a film because of a particular star or actor, unless it is someone very special, like Isabelle Huppert, whose films I will seek out regardless of the director. She has built a rich body of work since the 70's and her persona has developed into a complex iconic presence; she has come to signify a questioning of women's roles, sexuality and gender politics. This political edge is not always appreciated. Some critics refer to her as an ice queen or 'queen of sado-masochistic kink'. (*I Heart Huckabees* more playfully sums up the stereotype in Huppert's calling card: Cruelty. Manipulation. Meaninglessness). This underlines the tendency to disavow the

radical undertones of her persona in order to dismiss them.

Not every director utilizes Huppert's strength and oppositional potential in the best way. Christophe Honoré's *Ma mère* premiered at the 2004 festival and in it Huppert plays a mother who initiates her Catholic son into her world of extreme sexual experimentation, pleasure and degradation. She finally crosses the ultimate societal taboo by having sex with him before committing suicide. Although I did not like the film, Huppert's performance is often riveting and one imagines that it was courageous of her to have taken on this role at this point in her career (and one might guess, personal life). Last year Huppert starred in Patrice Chéreau's *Gabrielle*, a cerebral melodrama





The twins, Pascale and Jan

about a failed marriage and a woman who defends her right to exit it and leave a husband in whom she is no longer sexually interested. This year Huppert appeared in a project by a relatively new director, Joachim Lafosse, entitled *Nuë Propriété* or *Private Property*; it is the director's third feature film and given the small budget, he was fortunate to get a star of her caliber for one of the film's main roles. It is a family melodrama and Huppert plays the mother of twins who are at the end of their teenage years but are still not matured. They are played by real life twins Jérémie Renier (of the Dardennes' *L'enfant*) and his brother Yannick (in his first cinematic role). Though the film is not entirely successful or coherent, it is interesting and deserves mention.

*Nuë Propriété* is a drama about the tensions inherent in family life. A mother, Pascale/Isabelle Huppert lives with her two sons, Thierry/ Jérémie Renier and François/ Yannick Renier who seem to be about twenty, in a farmhouse (which we learn in the final shot is more of an estate). The parents have been divorced for a number of years, though the father's visits still elicit an explosive response from the mother. He appears infrequently to check in with his sons and offers financial support which the mother resents. Although the film is sympathetic to the father/ Patrick Descamps, who seems soft-spoken and more in control than his wife, it does suggest that he has made a new life for himself with his second family, a young wife and a toddler, and has left the burden of care and responsibility to his ex-wife, which, one assumes, accounts for her resentment. Although her sons are young adults they refuse to grow up and become independent. The mother disrupts the familial arrangement by finding a lover, Jan / Kris Cuppens, a neighbour who encourages her to sell her house and use the money to buy a place with him for a business they intend to start together. Pascale thus moves towards freeing herself from her entrapment in the house and her identity as housekeeper/caregiver. (Her lack of autonomy is emphasized in a love-making scene that takes place in Jan's cramped car, though it is unclear why they cannot use his house as he seems to live alone...) The twins resent her demands to be as autonomous and sexually active as their father. It is a premise of other melodramas like *All That Heaven Allows*; the idea of the mother as a sexual being is culturally taboo. In *Nuë Propriété*, the mother's powerlessness is further intensified by the fact that she has the right to reside in her husband's house but is not allowed legally to sell it, as the children are entitled to inherit the property (a law to which the film's title refers). This, though, deflects from the more profound problem, that the twins are resistant to change of any kind.

The film's English title, *Private Property*, alludes to ownership and control; François and Thierry feel they are entitled to enjoy the services of their mother as long as they need them. The twins seem to be representative of a current trend of young adults suffering from prolonged adolescence and immaturity, and the film is interesting in the way it openly presents this. François is reluctant and Thierry is openly hostile to allow changes that will disrupt their dependence on Pascale to provide meals (however critical they are of

them), laundry services, rides to town, and a place in which to live and play. Neither twin is ever shown pursuing studies or work. Thierry claims to study but is only seen pursuing his girlfriend when he finally gets to town. Instead they pass their time playing—they play video games together, shoot rats on their property, ride motorcycles in muddy fields around the house, even bathe together before having meals or relaxing in front of the TV. A strong homoerotic bond seems to bind them despite the differences in their personalities (It is, finally, the intrusion of Thierry's girlfriend that ignites the final physical fight.); Thierry is rude, hot-headed and demanding while François is quiet, softer spoken and more sensitive. (Ironically Pascale at one point blames her difficulties with Thierry on the assumption that he is becoming like his father, whereas the film seems to suggest that in fact he shares his explosive nature with her.) Unlike Thierry, François is more respectful of his mother and wishes to remain with her. When Pascale decides to leave, he is more pointedly lost and increasingly resents Thierry's abuse of their mother which precipitates her departure. Thierry suppresses any affection he may feel and uses his mother as a target for his anger. He blames her for the divorce and begrudges her an existence beyond serving the family.

The more intriguing aspects of the film are the allusions to the realities of family life that are rarely openly articulated. The film opens with a potentially fascinating scene of Pascale/Huppert admiring her still slim, attractive body in a camisole, in a mirror shot. She calls François and disingenuously claiming that she looks fat, flirts with him by asking his opinion, pushing him to admire her body and acknowledge her as a sexual being. Thierry is then introduced and he is immediately angry, ostensibly because Pascale is spending their money on her own needs. "They were cheap", she replies in her defense, to which he comments, "cheap to look like a whore", before apologizing. Her sexuality angers him; in a scene not long after this Thierry enters the bathroom where his mother is showering and the camera catches him looking at her in sidelong glances as he brushes his teeth—again commenting on the sexual tensions (both discomfiting and fascinating) that are denied in a home where adult family members live together in close quarters. Pascale is staking a claim to her identity as a mother and a person with a sexual identity (and this is intensified by the casting of a star with an iconic persona like



Isabelle Huppert's). There is often a sense that the number three (the mother and two sons) creates an imbalance where the third person intrudes on the intimacy of the couple; sometimes it is a son as in the scene where Pascale and François are watching TV together on the couch and Thierry returns home and seems awkward and left out, sometimes it is Pascale who intrudes into the fraternal closed world of the twins, or François who becomes the third party to Thierry and his girlfriend. Meals are marked by long silences and what fails to be said weighs on the conversation which is most often dominated by Thierry's angry admonishments. The many scenes at the table are shot in long takes with a static camera which serves to further underline the feeling of the mother's isolation and entrapment. People move in and out of the frame but there is a sense of fixity and resistance to movement which underlines the theme of the film. When Pascale tries to introduce Jan into their lives the result is disastrous; the boys mock their mother's imagined lovemaking mercilessly and are hostile to Jan when he comes for dinner and attempts to engage them in a discussion regarding their mother's desire to leave the house.

In many ways *Nue Propriété* remains incoherent because the film's allegiances seem to be with the twins, which overwhelms the mother's position. Huppert brings a complexity to the role that the film fails to support; her acting style which is marked by subtle expression and interiority contrasts and clashes with the rawer, naked externalized expressivity of the brothers, particularly Thierry. Lafosse speaks of Cassavetes as an influence which is apparent in the brothers' behaviour where internal feelings are exteriorized in the performances. Huppert's explosive moments, during the father's visit or near the film's end when she blames Thierry for François' injury, are mostly used to highlight the mother's hysteria, magnified against the father's level-headedness and quiet. Although the film is sympathetic to Pascale's entrapment in her role, as in the scene where she visits her ex-husband at his manicured estate and he basically denies having any responsibility for his sons' behaviour, it also seems to attribute the boys' psychological damage to the parents' failure to communicate (particularly the mother's). In the director's notes in the film's press material, Lafosse attributes the twin's rivalry to the "unresolved rivalry between the parents" which seems insufficient as an account of their perverse relationship. In an interview he also men-

tions that the mother creates some of the twins' problems by not defining limits. Tellingly the director is a twin and speaks of his experience with the situation presented in the film. "Life's logic was turned upside down and I found myself able to prevent my mother from living the life she wanted to lead". One gets the feeling that he may not fully have the distance he needs to address the charged emotions dramatized, although he intellectually understands how unfair this may be to the mother.

Not surprisingly, the film climaxes in a violent fight between the brothers who cannot cope alone, and the subsequent tragic accident ignites the explosion that ultimately liberates the family from their state of immobility. This is expressed in the film's final shot, where the camera suddenly very rapidly moves away from the house (revealing its huge size, despite the fact that it has been shot throughout in crowded close quarters with a sense of claustrophobia) to the accompaniment of screechy violins in a score that is noticeably intrusive as it is the film's first inclusion of music. The film's dedication at the start, "A nos limites", to our boundaries, suggests the lines that are drawn and crossed in family life and the film, to its credit, presents the problematic nature of family relationships with a kind of unvarnished directness that is not typical of North American films more concerned with entertainment; ultimately, however, *Nue Propriété* seems to be weighted toward the adolescents' point of view which leaves a Huppert admirer less than satisfied.

## Golden Door/ Nuovomondo

SUSAN MORRISON

The third film from Italian-born but American-trained Emanuele Crialese, *Golden Door/Nuovomondo* documents the journey of a poor Sicilian family's emigration from the old world to the new. The film is divided into three parts of approximately equal length: the decision to emigrate and leave-taking; life on board ship; Ellis Island and the rituals of inspection and sorting.

Neo-realist it is not, however. While we are presented with a visually stunning account of the primitive way of life

endured by the Mancuso family in their remote corner of Sicily, Crialese nevertheless opens up the parameters of the film's generic positioning as he inserts a liberal dose of unexpected fantasy into the mise-en-scène. In this way, he separates the old world from the new not just by an ocean but also by its inextricable immersion in ancient superstitions and beliefs. The film opens strikingly with shots of two people...a man and a youth, scrambling barefooted up a rock-strewn mountainside, in their mouths they appear to be holding onto large stones. Time and place are not evident...it could be sometime in the nineteenth century, or right now. What the two are doing and where they are going is unclear. Eventually, they climb up to a spot where there is a small cross stuck in the ground. Removing the stones from their mouths, they place them, amongst others which are already beneath the cross, apparently as offerings to God. The older of the two, the father Salvatore, asks God for a divine indication that his family should emigrate from their ancestral home. When they return to their farm house, they are shown photographic post cards sent from America that depict giant vegetables and animals, and gold coins growing on trees as wonders to be found in the new world. Salvatore takes this as God's response, and makes plans for departure, selling off his possessions in order to purchase tickets for himself, his two sons, and his mother.

The separation of the old from the new is made manifest in one of the most stunning and memorable scenes in the film. After the Mancuso family has arrived at the dock and their ship is about to depart, there is a moment when the screen is filled with an overhead shot of hundreds of people who pack the film frame. A few moments pass, and very gradually, a schism on the diagonal appears on the right side ... a thin white line which slowly expands, splitting the crowd (and shot) into two. This abstraction is startling. The viewer assumes this is another fantasy sequence, but it soon becomes apparent that the crowd of people is really two crowds: on the left, the passengers who are on board the ship; on the right, the people on the dock who are seeing them off. The combination of camera lens and camera angle have created a perspectival illusion that they are all on the same plane. In this economical yet highly effective way, Crialese has found a striking metaphor for the chasm opening up between those who go and those who stay behind.





The middle section of *Golden Door* takes place aboard the passenger ship. We are shown the usual features of such a journey; overcrowded (and segregated) sleeping quarters, quotidian routines and practices which fill up the endless days, and a dramatic sequence involving a storm at sea and the loss of a passenger. The last section of the film, however, is the more interesting as it takes place on Ellis Island once the passengers have disembarked. Much emphasis is placed on the institutional aspect of this setting; enormous spaces filled with anxious immigrants waiting to be processed through the system by anonymous but all-powerful officials. The immigrants, most of whom do not speak English, are needless to say, treated like inferior beings and subjected to a battery of tests, from the (filmically) conventional medical exams for a host of diseases to the (filmically) unconventional emphasis on psychological and mental tests that are intended to determine eugenically the suitability of a candidate for entry into the United States. Another apparent requirement for immigration is that single women find guarantors, men who will be responsible for them so they won't be a burden to the state. The scene depicting this is quite chilling, in that it

resembles a cattle call, where the women are herded into a room and seated on one side, and the men who are potential guarantors sit on the other, and when the women's names are called out, claim them, or not.

There is another noteworthy visual metaphor that is used in the film; the first time while the family is on board the ship, and the second time, as the final shot, to close the film. Unlike the earlier one, this is removed from the realism of the narrative, and inserted as a kind of prescient 'vision' of the blessings of the new world. On the first occasion, while the travails of the Mancusos and the other immigrants crammed into the steerage are being depicted, a shot is inserted that fills the screen with white. A small dark head which we can identify as Salvatore's, appears; the camera is above, looking down somewhat. As his arms move in what looks like swimming motions, (although he doesn't actually move forward in the frame), we realize with surprise that this is a concrete version of the immigrant's fantasy of America as the promised land of milk (and honey). At the film's end, the shot is repeated, but this time, the film frame depicts not just Salvatore and the members of his family

swimming in the milk, but as the camera pulls slowly back, it reveals more and more people swimming till the entire film frame is crammed with bodies traveling through this milky way to the promised land.

While I was impressed with the film on the whole, there was one aspect that I thought weak. Into the midst of this Italian peasant family's experience of emigration is parachuted the Anglo-French actress Charlotte Gainsbourg playing Lucy, a well-dressed multilingual woman of questionable origins. She is obviously of a different class than the Mancusos, yet she attaches herself to them and the ur-peasant Salvatore in particular, ostensibly to guarantee her acceptability as an emigrant for the emigration/immigration officers. Although there are insinuations that she is a woman of loose morals (why else would she be on her own in this situation?),

she nevertheless becomes the focus of Salvatore's affection and by the end of the film they have (quite unrealistically) coupled off. Perhaps because she is a 'name' actress, (and in the French publicity poster takes top billing), Gainsbourg was inserted into *Golden Door*, but there is a distinct disconnect between her character and the other more realistically conceived ones that populate the film.



# Cinema-Cinema

2006 LOS ANGELES FILM FESTIVAL

AFI FEST 2006

AMERICAN FILM MARKET 2006

55th INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL MANNHEIM-HEIDELBERG

DIANE SIPPL

The L.A. Fest to catch up on Sundance, the AFI Fest for Oscar sneaks, and the AFM for the gamble... a film critic's junket from summer to fall could go something like this. In 2006, the year-old Film Independent brought the Rockies to the Pacific at several grand old-style theaters in the youthful and once again charming Westwood Village; the American Film Institute showcased its alumni champions and Academy Award contenders mostly under one roof (and on top of it) in Hollywood's state-of-the-art ArcLight complex; and its adjoining American Film Market delivered 8,400 international film packagers, vendors, and shoppers and nearly 600 films to Santa Monica's endless (and often cubby-hole) beachfront screens. Owing to their calendar slots and their industry-hub locations, these three major film events, competing but also overlapping with each other for juries, sponsors, box office, and media coverage, have become their own kinds of tent poles for the market, whether it's art houses going digital or home screens of every size.

And what does all this mean for the fest goer, these days a globe-trotting cineaste with a bigger appetite for emotion than for popcorn? After all, it's our lives that call for cinema, as with all the arts, to talk to us and reassure us. We look to an artist whose perception might be keener, or imagination perhaps richer, to raise the right questions. Love and death, betrayal and redemption, loss and discovery—we bring them all to the theater with us where shoulder-to-shoulder, face-to-face with the big screen, we can get all stirred up. But cinema-cinema is more than a mirror in the dark, because it never leaves us alone. So a festival need not rely on just savory plots, favorite actors, and brilliant performances. We come to it for more: the enacted story is not the film. And aesthetic amnesiacs that we are, we happily forget about the other ways in which the medium works in order for us to be touched, poked, turned over and inside out—that is, if we warm up to films in their myriad forms, because the more we go and the more we see, we find that each film has its own embrace. Forget the neat genre labels and the “isms” (realism, surrealism, neo-realism, magical realism) and the boxes for fiction and documentaries. But do consider that before cinema was coded as narrative or fed by the stage, it was called “the liveliest art” among at least seven, and certainly its pioneers and their descendants have drawn from them all to create what we long for between us and the screen.

The lavishly mounted *Curse of the Golden Flower* had its

world premiere as the closing gala of the AFI Fest with its director, Zhang Yimou and star, Gong Lee attending. China's most expensive film ever, it is also the country's submission to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for its Best Foreign Film competition. Monumental in scale, *Curse* lends wry pictorial resonance to the Western expression, “... for all the gold in China” and calls for reflection on the nature of the epic. Cecille B. De Mille would have been gratified to see Zhang's army of extras fill the screen beside all that glitters, but I was not. I was, however, rewarded with a river of tears in viewing *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* weeks earlier in a near-empty art house on an equally big screen that suited the film admirably for its huge emotions. This “small picture” of fathers and sons, though not necessarily each others', tapping Zhang's many talents and prolific career for which he is revered and beloved, shows that he has served his country in more ways than one, and most certainly he has served his art. At the festival, I heard him foolishly criticized for both.

And this is the danger of portraying “special people” on the screen, whether it's the imperial court of China's Tang Dynasty or martyrs of our own regimes. *Bobby*, which opened the AFI Fest, takes on a timely challenge, even if it doesn't live up to it all around. Spotting Robert F. Kennedy as special not so much because he was the prodigy of a political dynasty (consider the recent *Marie Antoinette* and *The Queen*) but because he was someone we needed, then as we do now, the film skates on thin ice trying to provide a panorama of the '60s with as many movie stars as issues generated in the era. The cameos, some (such as Sharon Stone's and Demi Moore's) less trite than others, would work better in the relentlessly cross-cut mini tales of the night the presidential candidate was assassinated if writer-director-actor Emilio Estevez shared a deeper grasp of the shifting social and moral ground and the remarkable coalescence of its complex themes in life. This is a tall order for any era, and Estevez, taking the first giant step of his career in cinema, is ambitious and sometimes successful, especially with his stroke of genius in refraining from casting “Bobby.” Kennedy's presence as a voice-over throughout the film and the mere glimpse of him in vintage footage are at once chilling and haunting, effects that an actor could hardly outdo and that any writer would be hard-pressed to match.

Yet a writer of such caliber may have turned up at the AFI





*The Lives of Others*

Fest in the form of Florian Henkel von Donnersmarck, Germany's Oscar contender. Paradoxically, his fascinating and impeccable *The Lives of Others* may fall on its face for the same reasons. For a first feature that compelled him to conduct extensive research overflowing from archives to personal anecdotes, the director is clearly and persuasively in command of his own writing project; it is *what* he writes that instigates debate, and perhaps this is exactly as he would have it. And why not? This post-wall perspective on East Berliners' aspirations under the Stasi microscope (more like oral bugging devices) of the mid-1980s is all about interrogation—then, now, and in the art of cinema itself. Serious discussion is just beginning to be generated today about Germany during the Cold War, and it rekindles trans-historical and potentially universal issues regarding our rights to privacy, our freedom of belief, expression, and movement, and the role of artists in political unrest. One particular question arises for a secret police officer in the film: not whether we can ever know enough about the "lives of others," but whether it's possible to know *too* much. For a character to spy on others, such as a talented playwright and actress couple under surveillance, is a long-held convention of cinematic storytelling, but Von Donnersmarck adds to it exponentially, creating tragic irony with elegant dialogue, purposeful music, fine acting and stunning camera work with a nod to Hollywood studios. Yet the crux of it all is really something quite simple: the conviction that we have to live with our feelings, and that as human beings, they will get the better of us. In thinking, creating, and loving, we can drown—and we can live. *The Lives of Others* is based on a wish and a hope, and for some of us, it comes as a worthy surprise.

Looking into the same era with another tone entirely is Corneliu Porumboiu's delightful satire, *12:08 East of Bucharest*, one of the freshest films to appear in a long time, yet emerging from a culture with a long tradition of incisive humor. On December 22, 1989, dictator Nicolae Ceausescu fled Romania by helicopter, but was there really a revolution? Sixteen years later the citizens of an unnamed town are found debating the issue, but only after we follow three of them on their most banal paths during the course of a day as they make their phone calls, try to manage their hangovers and debts, dodge the children's firecrackers and finagle their social obligations. In the end this first half of the film looks ingenious, because

writer-director-producer Porumboiu makes their minutia seem so unconscious that we hardly realize it is exactly what betrays the trio and even looms large, symbolically, when they appear on an afternoon TV talk show commemorating the big day. The subjectivity of collective memory turns tragi-comic as the film lampoons a history professor who was most likely drunk at that crucial moment in time and a hired Santa Claus who sits at the talk-table making paper boats before the amateurish TV camera. The deadpan humor benefits from the static camera: its tableau shot of this glum and incapacitated news team lasts for the entire second half of the film and allows us to form our own opinions, along with the call-in participants, of the two would-be witnesses and the legacy of any so-called regime change. As for the callers, their best input is to let those on the TV show know that outside snow has started to fall. "Enjoy it now—tomorrow it will all be mud."

Though Tony Gatlif's work has taken him to Romania before with *Gadjo Dilo*, what his return there for *Transylvania* adds to his oeuvre is a slow sensuality that lets us drink in the local life of the Carpathian countryside in arresting images. There the daily routines of the villagers-turned-actors fascinate us like mysteries, until in the end these strangers are revealed to be as astonishingly caring and giving as the two travelers, played by Asia Argento and Birol Ünel with their usual quiet fire. Yet like other contagious trance-films Gatlif has contributed to world cinema (*Vengo* comes readily to mind), *Transylvania* can also suddenly erupt in a dizzying whirl, here to music Gatlif has composed and sometimes performed himself along with Delphine Mantaulet. Regardless of the pace, supporting the strident moves of the characters and the heady landscapes is a rhythm so finely calibrated that it appears to be etched onto the screen, through performance, framing and editing, like an inherent dance inevitably expressed.

In some ways, what Tony Gatlif did for the autumn's AFI Fest 2006, Fatih Akin did for the summer's Los Angeles Film Festival. Director Fatih Akin had used actor Birol Ünel from *Transylvania* in his own transfixing *Head On*, shown at the AFI Fest 2005. In 2006 Akin's *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul*, playing at the Los Angeles Film Festival, worked as brilliantly as a testimony of Turkey and world relations today as it did as a music film, which seems to come from Akin by virtue of the air he breathes. Like Gatlif, he obliterates boundaries



among languages of music, dance, drama, and reportage—I'm quite sure, without ever thinking about it.

In its narrative competition the Los Angeles Film Festival shows first features by Americans, and the best of these was *Swedish Auto*, which marks Derek Sieg as a most impressive lyric voice of his generation. His inspired debut is enchanting precisely for its modesty, to be found in its main characters, a garage mechanic (Lukas Haas) and a coffee shop waitress (January Jones); in their simple drives, to work hard and to take care of people; and in their aspirations, to enjoy the beauty of life, wherever they can find it. For Carter, who repairs Swedish cars under the fatherly guidance of his boss Leroy (Lee Weaver), beauty is to be listened to and taken in from afar, in the rehearsals of a violin virtuoso he follows around town incognito. What he doesn't know is that the waitress, Darla, is close on his heels, studying his every move. And most refreshingly, jealousy and rivalry have not much to do with it. Writer-director Sieg knows how to create characters who know themselves (even though they may not be aware of it), and not only that, they care about what they do. To see Carter re-build an old Volvo from the inside out into a vehicle that is his pride and joy is to see him forge a life-altering bond with Darla through the same slow steps of work and art. It's enough to turn two vicarious-living voyeurs (we could even add more, the film's viewers) into active players in a game worth the risk. In fact, embedded in the narrative are serious issues of sex and its violations, and Sieg's characters face them, head-on, all the while the quietly panning camera surveys the small-town turf and environs of Charlottesville, Virginia, where Sieg grew up. It affords him an imaginative language of pure cinema—movement and light in windows and mirrors—to show us what intimacy is all about. Like Carter's red Volvo, *Swedish Auto* is a vehicle that will take its maker places worth the drive.

In 2004 the austere and mesmerizing *Tang Poetry* put screenwriter-director Zhang Lu, also a novelist, on the map of world cinema. His second feature, *Grain in Ear*, gave the 2006 Los Angeles Film Festival one of its meatiest foreign entries, though it surely looks more like a lean work of cinematic architecture than the polemic on power play that it quietly stages. In a low bungalow beside an isolated railroad depot in the coal mining backlands of Beijing, Cui Shunji raises her only son by herself, selling kimchee (Korean pickled vegetables) from her cart. She is Korean-Chinese (as is Zhang), and longs for the cultural ties and traditions that would let her be herself. And how can she make friends when she's always on the run due to the lack of a sales license? In short, her gender, ancestry and meager living all get the better of her, but in the most contradictory of ways. Cui's ethnic counterpart-turned-lover has a wife; the neighbor man has issues with that; the lover defends himself by slandering Cui; and the local policeman, otherwise helpful with a work permit, is a drunk and violates her under his custody. Stated in this way, the film's themes and actions seem schematically piled up, but the effect is quite the opposite. This is because as spare as Zhang's dialogue is—often delivered off-screen or symbolically, even ironically, in verse, songs, bedtime stories, or bar-room jokes that are the only “music” of the film—his visual style is even more pared down and all the more articulate. The film is comprised almost entirely of long shots, distancing the viewer but playing up perspective. And except for one thought-provoking moment, the camera never moves. This

beautifully minimalist film becomes astutely political, with a power as quiet and fateful as its protagonist. *Grain in Ear* is an edifice of sexual and cultural politics that ultimately topples with the weight of its imbalance, and Zhang's contemplative camera is poised to watch it fall. The title refers to the accumulation of strength in the harvest season—“Grain in ear, the busiest time of year.”

Of the endless barrage of films vying for attention at the 2006 American Film Market, the one that won't let go of me is *The Go Master*, Tian Zhuangzhuang's enigmatic meditation on the fundamental questions of life during half a century of Sino-Japanese history, questions that rear their heads today in East - Middle East - West relations. The time span coincides with the real life of Wu Qingyuan who, well into his 90s, appears briefly in the opening frames of the film: he is the top player in the world of the ancient game of Go, and he has also overturned its established traditions and strategies. Visually, Go looks simple: two players face each other on the floor, kneeling and sitting on their feet. Between them is a wooden block that serves as a game board, its surface etched with squares. Upon it they place and move polished pebbles, either black or white. Matches become tournaments, and the fans and the media make them history. But what looks like a stationary game for stoic players in fact requires intense energy and stamina, an intellectual, emotional, and soulful vigor few people possess.

Both Wu and Go are native to China, but Wu (played by Chang Chen) emigrates to Japan, where Go has become more stringent and disciplined, and he remains there, enduring political turbulence, war, and a controversial image in both countries. We observe his education and spirituality, illness and injury, loves and losses, yet these are hardly dramatized. Cinematographer Wang Yu and designer Emi Wada create such striking images that we're never quite looking for a narrative as we contemplate their passing beauty and significance. Rather, we look at the screen much in the same way that the players look at the game board, pondering its opportunities and challenges. The rules of the game and the scoring are never indicated to us, nor are the strategies of the players. Still, the choices and exclusions of the camera's focus or depth of field, its lingering within the frame once the action has left it, and its slow panning accompanied by the pluck of a singular piano key or guitar string all conjure the Go board as a mirror of life. With great finesse, *The Go Master* raises timely issues of the relation between citizenship and nationality; between vocational calling and personal mentors; and between knowledge of classical texts and the individual pursuit of one's faith, on the one hand, and membership in academies, religions, and sects, on the other hand. Near the end of the film, an establishing shot of Wu inside a seaside home is immediately followed by a jump cut to the outside looking in, to him in the same chair framed by opened sliding doors, paned windows, the ocean's reflections on their glass, and his abstracted figure in a background mirror. The scene uses the film's wide-screen cinematography exquisitely to call up layers of visages of Wu, all invitations to ponder perceptions like the one uttered in his real-life idyllic garden in the film's opening shot, “Even monkeys form factions—they eat our persimmons.”

The International Film Festival Mannheim-Heidelberg in Germany, celebrating its 55<sup>th</sup> year, identifies itself as a festival of newcomer auteurs of artistic cinema. So it's not surprising



that Derek Sieg's *Swedish Auto*, discussed above, found its way to that competition. In fact a number of the films there portrayed children abused by parental figures. Yet together they show how form and style can vary incredibly with the signature of the filmmaker. For example, Reha Erdem's *Times and Winds* (*Be? Vakit*, meaning *Five Times*) defies a linear narrative; rather it is structured in concert with the intervals in the Turkish day at which prayer is offered. What's more, the film moves backwards through the day, and the rituals are secular: adolescents scheme as to how to kill their parents; fathers beat or berate their sons while mothers exploit their daughters as servants; aunts and uncles and a grandmother betray the roots of the problem in their own families. The chain of authority would feel pervasive and timeless if it weren't for the Scope format opening the frame to the mountain clouds and valley vistas, leading to the sea, nature itself figuring as a higher being. To see a baby tumble from a girl's arms over a rocky path or a child sunken into a bed of rosemary for refuge is to sense the sadness of three local youths, first-time actors given mythic stature by the musical score of Arvo Pärt, to which the entire film was shot and edited. *Times and Winds* won a cinematography award for Florent Herry.

Norwegian director and co-writer Erik Richter Strand won the prestigious Fassbinder Award for the best unconventional narration with *Sons*, his debut film that captivates audiences with its suspenseful and poignant storytelling. Lars, a life guard at an Oslo swimming pool, is as tender-hearted as he is self-righteously hot-tempered in defense of his integrity. Why, then, would he turn to spying, stalking, breaking and entering, stealing, blackmail, mugging, and assault, especially when his adversary, according to the man's own claims and those of his protégés, is embracing, accommodating, supportive, and protective? The action of this film—part social drama and part psychological thriller—speaks a thousand words, words deliberately kept under wraps in a gray area that Lars sees in black and white. The script further shores up the media, from the camcorder to the Internet to the nightly TV news, as no reliable source of clarity. Nor is the cinema, but for different reasons. *Sons* allows the questions to be asked: what in a relation is forced? Voluntary? Naïve? And why is a teenage boy's response to a father figure really only about trust? *Sons* never becomes a *policier*; its protagonists (as they emerge) need to play to their own catharses, and while we might see through them or ahead of them, their drama, with all its sticklers and backfires, becomes our clarion to engaged spectatorship and conscious citizenship alike.

Plot-driven and performance-heavy, *Sons* becomes an effective and important character study as well. Another debut film in Mannheim, using a novel as its source and actors from the theatre, would seem to work similarly, but it speaks another language yet again. In his memoirs, Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz (1804–1980) wrote about his male lover dying in his arms in a dreary hospital under terrible conditions. Two of his novels, *The Birch Grove* and *Young Maids from Wilko*, also about death, either literally or in spirit, are known to world cinema thanks to Andrzej Wajda. I, for one, will never forget Daniel Olbryski's character having to grow up the reference uttered by one of the Wilko girls, now grown up, to a man "... fumbling about with no purpose in life." Iwaszkiewicz, a neo-romanticist, knew his purpose: to feel and to express, through the art of words.

Izabella Cywinska extends that art from the page to the screen. The author sought to focus on common people in their everyday lives, which for him meant nature and biology in the forests and hills of the Polish countryside, and filmmaker Cywinska reflects, "I asked my cinematographer to find us a place at the end of the world. It was near the sea, an old palace once belonging to the German aristocracy but nearly destroyed in World War II, after which it became an agricultural collective under Polish communism. We added some elements to our film—a boat, a dog, and the homosexual tension, which was suppressed when Iwaszkiewicz wrote his novel, *The Lovers of Marona*. For me the time and the place were not so important, or even that it was tuberculosis. I wanted it to be universal, and not so realistic. Yet I wasn't aiming for a parallel, surreal world, either—something more like an old painting. I took my cues from nature."

In the last days of autumn at the edge of the marshes surrounding a lake, sits a small village with only a school and a sanatorium. There a pretty teacher and a patient want one thing; a man who visits on a motorcycle wants it, too. If their actions are bold, their words are sparse and more like elliptical outbursts than dramatic dialogue. In this way, if not so much for the score's chanting female voices, the dreamscape between life and death becomes quietly operatic, to the rhythms of an angel, an inmate, and a beast—their arrivals and departures, ups and downs, mixings and matchings, victories and losses. With surprising angles, the camera captures the color and light of the season, the textures and tones of the atmosphere, a pictorial beauty that shows what Izabella Cywinska, after long experience in theater and television, brings to the art of cinema with her rapturous first feature, *The Lovers of Marona*.

Aleksandr Sokurov attended the Mannheim-Heidelberg festival as Master of Cinema with five films, including *Father and Son*. Exploring its wondrous celebration of paternal-filial love could culminate this article with fruitful irony, but Sokurov merits a separate discussion dwelling on his singular approach to filmmaking. Denmark's Ole Christian Madsen returned to Mannheim with the ingenious *Prague*, a striking vehicle for actor Mads Mikkelsen probing the reasons for father-son abandonment and letting them quietly explode like a flower blooming in slow motion. But I'll close here with Tomas Donela's tour de force from Lithuania, *The Boy and the Sea*, in which a hide-and-seek game between a boy and his grandfather highlights the essence of cinema all the while the give-and-take of the ocean's waves fills the frame with prescient movement. Footprints wash away in the sand, a beach umbrella leaves a long shadow, and a blind man's walking stick becomes in turn a measuring rod of the tide, a goal post, and then abstractly, the camera's division line between the characters, a relic of a man, or a church steeple in the sand for the boy to pray by. He is played by Donela's young son Martynas, and Donela passes through the film, too, which is inscribed, "In memory of my Father." The changing but endless blues of the sea and the sky as the solitary boy counts out the time leave an impression as unforgettable on the screen as in life. In this fifteen-minute gem, Tomas Donela is his own master of cinema.

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# Of Human Bonding

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
TSAI MING-LIANG

AYSEGUL KOC

I interviewed Tsai towards the end of the festival, accompanied by Robin Wood, in a shopping mall that doubled for the festival press office. Quite appropriately so because the 'festival canvas bag' distributed to members of media was filled with anti-wrinkle night creams and similar promotional items. I would have loved a festival book instead: 'A book, a book, all my Garnier and Starbucks for a book!' Against the star-crazed, overly commercialized backdrop of a film festival, Tsai talked about remembrance, frailty and human bonding in the context of his films, including his latest *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*.

**AK:** Let's start with a new theme you explore in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, which is tending to someone, taking care of someone.

**TML:** Life is a non-stop learning process, you gain some experience, then you forget and learn again and it goes on. The theme of tending is about the same process. I keep reflecting back on my own life, which is full of surprises. Particularly right now there is a new joy in my life, a little boy, Lee Kang-Sheng's nephew. I never thought I could grow such a strong emotional attachment for someone. When the baby was two years old and sick, I put him to sleep in my arms. He recovered eventually but the intensity of the experience stayed on with me. But when I was shooting *IDWSA*, the idea of taking care of someone was not my original idea. The film was about the identity crisis of foreign workers but it got carried in other directions as well. While shooting the film one day, the female lead was late and we started filming the 'tending' scenes spontaneously. I was pleasantly surprised by the result. Those particular scenes changed the entire movie. You begin having doubts about how real the script is. The whole film can be wrapped up in that one scene where Norman Bin Atun (the immigrant worker) nurses Lee Kang-Sheng's character. That is the story. So despite the fact that there is no distinct story line nonetheless there are story lines in all of my movies.

**AK:** A story is not a 'cut-copy-paste', it unfolds in many ways.

**TML:** Like life.

**AK:** Yes, like life.

**TML:** The biggest challenge that I always face is the definition of a movie, what movie is and why I am shooting it. There are a lot of things like movie dialogues and music scores, acting and per-

formance that audiences are accustomed to. I find these things confusing. I doubt the meaning of these things that people seem to take for granted. People are widely accepting the norm that these are entertainment, simple-minded entertainment. It is like fast-food business, you are catering to what people crave. I envy him (Robin Wood) because he was born at a time when people were making movies, they may not have known what they were doing but they respected film as a great medium.

**RW:** When I grew up in the 30s and 40s I adored movies from the start. I went to all Betty Grable, Carmen Miranda and I loved them and I grew out of them and today I am horrified to see that the great majority of Hollywood films are much less intelligent than those Grable and Miranda films that I saw when I was six.

**TML:** When I was four years old I came across a film, it was a Shanghai opera about a mythical story. At that time I was fascinated by it, though I didn't really understand it. Then at university I went on a search for that film and revisited it again. I realized that the film was really good, I understood it this time around. I was amazed at how people could come up with such good work.

**AK:** Going back to your films, I missed *The Wayward Cloud* but... (we're cut off by the noise of shopping carts being herded).

**RW:** George Bush could kill them off as terrorists. (Laughs.)

**AK:** When we look at *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, you were preoccupied with loss, decay and death. In *IDWSA* you seem very hopeful, there is affection, healing. Can we say that there is a life cycle in terms of the themes of your films?

**TML:** Yes, it is pretty much like a cycle. Cycle is not something you can change or manipulate. If you stop pursuing so hard, things would actually come back to you more naturally. For example in *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, I felt as if the theatre was calling me to make a film about it. Unfortunately those old movie theaters in Malaysia are mostly demolished. Then I found the one in *GDI* in Taipei. Same thing for *IDWSA*, I had a lot of Indian people in the movie and I was never shy to approach them. There is a sense of familiarity because when I was a kid my grandfather would take me to the movies, mostly Hong Kong movies. On the way to the theatre there was an Indian temple and my grandfather would take me there. These things





*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*

come back to me so naturally. I don't even think about whether to use them in my films or not. It is so familiar.

I can relate to Mr. Wood because we both have a special power: the ability to choose what's not trendy. The most obvious one is the use of technology, you don't see computer generated images in my films. That makes my movies look like the movies from the seventies.

**RW: Old fashioned, like me.**

**TML:** It is beautiful. I agree that bad things should be replaced with better things but often that is not the case.

**AK: One of the oldest theatres in Toronto was torn down to make condos a few years ago.**

**TSM:** More theatres are being torn down in Asia probably. The pursuit of 'civilisation' is even more drastic there. Last night on the news on TV, politicians in black suits were talking about 'sisterhood' of cities in China and Canada and how that's going to be mutually beneficial in terms of modernization. Most of what's presented as progress is neatly tied to economic interests. The general public is deprived of what they deserve.

**AK: Speaking of economic interests, we never see money in your films. It's as if people barter things, bum a cigarette from one another, give gifts but there is no exchange of money.**

**TML:** The least stingy people are the ones that are poor. The characters in my films are people who don't have much. There is nothing more important than having a connection with another person.

**AK: Regarding the cinematography of your films, what is the reason behind having the camera at a fixed position, usually taking a long wide shot?**

**TML:** I often find looking through camera lens is like looking through a special eye, a window. It provides important things to see. The best way to handle it is to handle it as it is. It is a tool, a medium to see through.

**AK: Instead of manipulating?**

**TML:** Yes. It gives people a chance to see something that they would not otherwise see. For example dark corners where you don't see. There are lives in it. And of course it is very difficult to find the right distance to place the camera. The tension of it is to break the barrier of the frame. Most of the time I put a lot

of elements in the frame, they all require attention. The pace of the movie is also important, how long is the camera set to absorb all these elements, including lighting, the depth of a corridor or the passersby.

Last year in Berlin, a journalist I met, a woman in her fifties told me that most of the time when she sees films she feels as if someone is trying to flip the pages for her, despite the fact that sometimes she is touched by the story. But then she said with my films she has complete freedom.

**AK: I watch your films like I look at paintings.**

**TML:** Sometimes I feel like keeping it even longer but the production company says we only have two hours. (Laughter)

**RW: The last ten minutes of *Vive L'Amour*, is that your longest take?**

**TML:** Two years ago Lee Kang-Sheng and I shot another movie. He was the director. It's called *The Missing*, one scene is ten minutes where an old lady is trying to find her grandson. He hid the camera in the tree and placed the action right under the tree. The people interacting with the grandmother, the actress, were real people, passers by. They really tried to help her find her grandson.

**RW: I didn't see *The Wayward Cloud*, last year at the festival. Two of my friends did. They told me afterwards 'I hate that film, how could he make that film? I love his other films so much'.**

**TML:** How your friends felt might have been right. Their judgment might have been right for them. But wait till you see it. When you're watching porn at home, you can fast forward it. But at a movie theatre you cannot, so maybe that is part of your friends' frustration.

**AK: I haven't seen the film either but I guess a question that can be asked is what you have done differently in that film that doesn't fit with the 'canon' of your other films in the eyes of some spectators.**

**TML:** I've done things the same way. It is just that the focus was on sex. But I have to admit that there was a lot of anger, a lot of negative emotions in this film. But that gradually dissolved in the process of making the film, mainly because of the great



performances of the actors. If it weren't for them it would have been impossible to make such a movie. This movie gave me the chance and the courage to finally look at a naked body. I realized what the boundaries are that prohibited us from doing so.

**RW:** It is also the only film of yours that hasn't come out on DVD in North America.

**TML:** It sold pretty well in Taiwan and it is doing well in Japan at the moment. Some people associate that with the fact that the film is about sex but don't forget that it is still one of my films.

**RW:** I've only seen *IDWSA* once but I can easily say that it is it may be your greatest film. It seems to be a kind of summing up of your work.

**AK:** In what sense?

**RW:** It combines so many elements of the previous films, combining *Vive L'Amour*, *The River*, *The Hole* and others. It is marvelously organized.

**TML:** I find it to be the most mature of my works. I envy the films of great filmmakers of the past and what they were able to achieve. For me there are still constraints that stop me from producing a completely satisfactory work. But I can say that *IDWSA* makes me quite happy.

**AK:** In terms of the constraints, people seem to handle gore and violence quite well in, let's say, action movies, but sex is still a taboo.

**TML:** There was a lot of discussion around *The Wayward Cloud* and most of it began before anybody had seen the film. It was mainly about if there were great sex scenes or blowjobs in the film. Then there was a press screening and everybody just stopped talking. And the reason is the fact that what they found when they saw the film was rather serious. I try to deal with sex as a daily activity, a routine as a normal thing just like eating or sleeping. It might be disappointing but it's true, it's reality. When I was shooting *Vive L'Amour*, there was a scene where the actor was peeing and then she asked for some more toilet paper because she left something else there as well.

(Laughter)

So I learn a lot through making films. I realize that people in general have such a bad attitude towards sex. Somebody at the screening on Monday asked me if masturbation was part of my culture, if that was a cultural thing.

**AK:** How do you react to a question like that?

**RW:** 'What? You mean it is not part of yours?' (Laughter)

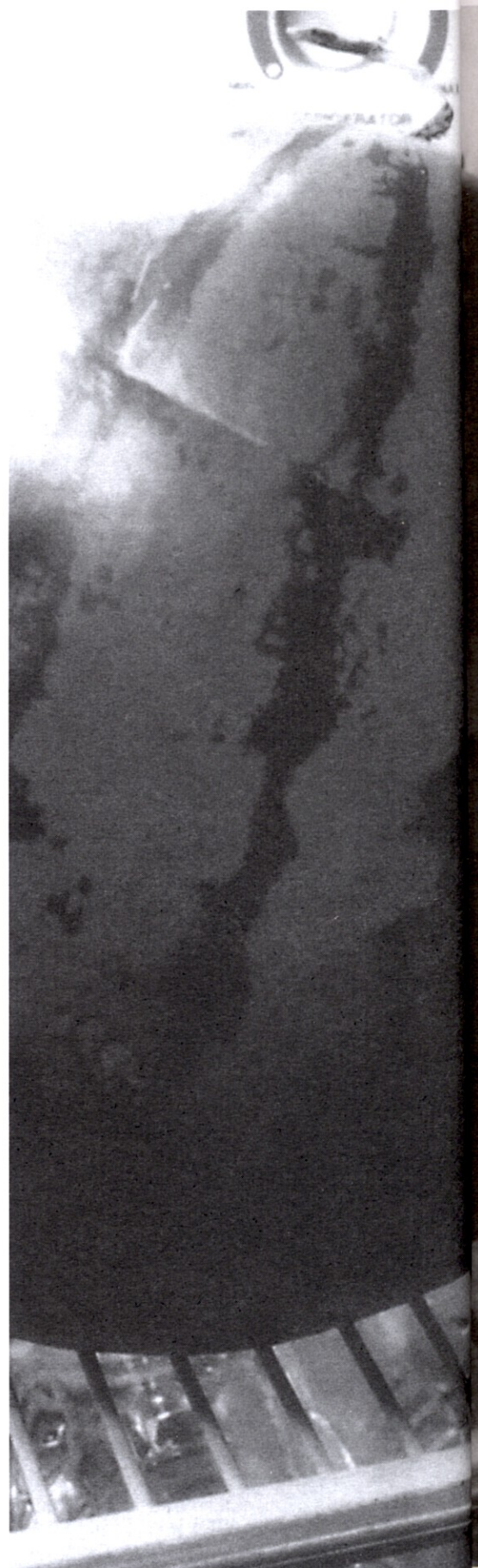
**TML:** I don't see much difference between people, we all have needs, we go through things. I guess some people view things differently. I'm asked all sorts of things. In the last scene of *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, Lee Khang Cheng's character is buying something from a fortune-telling vending machine. There is no close-up on the piece of paper that comes out of the machine. So upon watching the film, some people asked me 'What's written on the paper?' and I replied 'I don't know.'

**RW:** Do you think there is any hope for our civilization?

**TML:** I want to try at least, especially when you're the one who asks the question. I feel very close to your sensibilities. But we don't know what the future holds.

Returning to Toronto for the 31st TIFF in September was a sad occasion for me. Last time I was in town was in May for HotDocs Documentary Festival and it was the last I ever saw my friend Roberto Ariganello. Director of Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT) at the time, Roberto died in a tragic swimming accident in August—so said the brief e-mail from LIFT. This writing is dedicated to the memory of my friend, the uncompromising independent filmmaker Roberto Ariganello, who I believe shared much with the cinematic universe of Tsai Ming-Liang.

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# After This Director's Seventeen Years of Exile

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
PATRICK TAM

ALICE SHIH

Patrick Tam, the retrospective subject of this year's Udine Far East Film Festival, is an interesting member of the Hong Kong New Wave filmmakers of the early eighties. His works might have been mistakenly marketed as genre films, but with surprises exceeding audience expectations, he always provided more than the genre formula. His latest work after a seventeen years hiatus, *After This Our Exile* (2006), has garnered numerous awards in Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong. During his absence from the director's chair, he exercised his creativity by helping other fellow directors as their art director and editor when he was not teaching. His editor credits includes Wong Kar-Wai's *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Ashes of Time* (1994), and Johnnie To's *Election* (2005). His early job training at TVB reveals to us the evolutionary journey of most of the Hong Kong New Wave directors of the time. It is, however, his integrity and passion as a filmmaker that makes him unique and admirable.

The following article has been assembled from material gathered during two conversations I had with Tam between November, 2006 and February, 2007. The interviews were conducted in Chinese.

**AS:** We are thrilled to learn that you have been honoured as the subject of a retrospective at this year's Udine Far East Film Festival in Italy. What was your reaction when they first approached you?

**PT:** It was in 2000 when Alberto Pezzotta, who has studied and published a book on Hong Kong Cinema, first approached me for a retrospective. He likes my films and he thought it would be a good idea, but I was very hesitant at the time. Frankly speaking, I'm not pleased with my previous works as I see errors and inadequacies. Some of them even feel incomplete. Yet, both Pezzotta and the president of the festival, Sabrina Baracetti, kept trying to persuade me over the years. Finally, with the completion of *After This Our Exile* (ATOE) this year, I felt the timing was right and I gave in to their persistence.

**AS:** You are originally from Hong Kong—how did you come up with a story that is set in Malaysia?

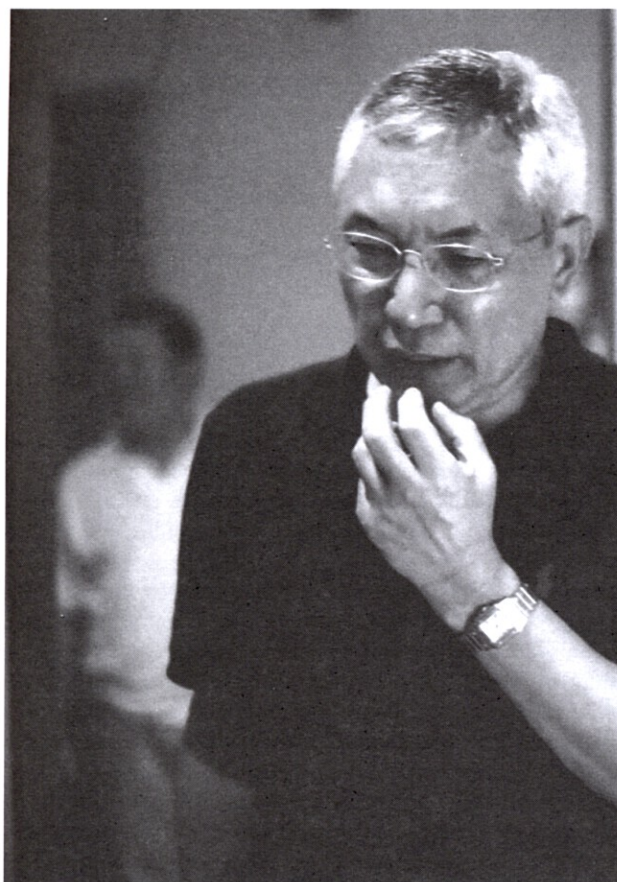
**PT:** The story was developed ten years ago when I was teaching

a screen-writing workshop in Malaysia. My idea was to foster collaboration between the student writers and me as a director, and the story of ATOE was a result of class assignments. It came from a piece of news in Malaysia at that time. An incompetent father had forced his son to steal because they were poor. We didn't recreate the whole scenario in actuality. We just took this headline and started to develop characters around it to make it credible. We then invented circumstances around their situation and slowly a story about a disintegrating, dysfunctional family emerged. A key member of the family was unable to communicate or express his affection, and as a result, the next generation suffered the deprivation of love and education. These are serious issues that matter to me.

"...after this our exile..." is actually a line from the Catholic prayer, *Hail Holy Queen*. Though it is taken from a prayer to the Virgin Mary, I did not intend, at least not consciously, to give the "passage" of my film a kind of religious reading, as a journey toward religious redemption. "Exile" should be taken as this life of ours on earth, where we will find no peace or rest, not until the very last moment of our lives. It also accounts for our real lack of direction in life. Though, very often, we seem to have goals or targets we aim for, this is illusory. Not one of the main characters in the film, father, mother or son, know where they are heading or what they are after, despite the fact that we often see shots of their feet moving forward. They are lost souls who can never find the right way to a meaningful life, or the right direction in life. The "After" is therefore meaningful, for it points toward the last scene when Boy is standing all alone by the river bank. After all that has happened, where he will be or what he will become... what we are left with in the end ... these are all questions that will never be easy to answer. Will it be a state of grace, or a sense of loss? Will there be redemption or not? We will never know, never be sure. What we can get hold of in life are only fragments of memory, the presence of our absence, that ultimately provide proof that we have lived.

**AS:** ATOE was shot in a realistic style, yet the main characters were played by established Asian superstars instead of unknown character actors. How did you downplay their stardom and bring up their credibility as common people?





Patrick Tam (left), editor, screenwriter, director



**PT:** Building trust between the actor and the director is the most important element in an actor/director relationship. The director in turn, has to give his full support to his actors. Since *ATOE* is a piece of realism, I didn't want the audience to think of these people on screen as acting. I put a lot of thought into the casting. Firstly, I needed to be convinced that the actors possessed the potential to portray these characters. Secondly, the role must be a new challenge. The audience would then experience a fresh, as opposed to a stale, repetitive, performance. There must also be a blend of familiar and new faces among the cast. Since we already had two stars in the lead, for added chemistry I chose unfamiliar faces or cast pop singers against their idol stereotypes to play non-glamorous supporting roles.

**AS:** How did you lead Aaron Kwok and Charlie Young to such breakthrough performances? They were never considered to be serious actors and had never delivered powerful performances of this calibre before. It was very evident, especially in the love scene.

**PT:** I guess Aaron and Charlie really liked and understood the story after their first reading. During the shoot, I gave them a complete view of my interpretation of the characters. I'm the sort of director who likes to plan every scene out. I don't improvise, as I do lots of prep work. I explained to them their characters' motives and actions before every scene, and also what should be the tone and pace of their dialogue. I communicated with my actors on every point.

We didn't advertise anything about the love scene because we didn't want to exploit it. The scene was there because the

story called for it. We didn't put it in just to spice up the story; there was an inner necessity. The story came to the point when the husband knew that the wife had decided to leave, and he tried to prove his manhood by possessing her as property. He actively imposed himself on her and her reaction was expressed mainly through her hands. Her indecision whether to reject or accept him was conveyed through the hand movements of pushing away and pulling in, externalizing her mixed emotions of love and hate. Charlie delivered a superb performance in that scene.

**AS:** Apart from being a director, you are also a screen-writer, an art director and an editor. How did you nourish yourself as a renaissance man in filmmaking? What or who influenced your interest in film?

**PT:** Renaissance man? No, I'm just putting in all I know to shape my own creative work. I enjoyed watching films from a young age and I developed an interest in all areas of filmmaking. Before I became a filmmaker, I was, in fact, very intrigued by books on architecture. I was fascinated by the space and structures of modern architecture. Too bad my math was not good enough and I couldn't pursue architecture as a career. Filmmaking is actually a spatial art as well. The locations as well as the interior design and set decoration are all related to the architecture of the space within the frame. My family has also nourished my taste in painting, literature and music, which really helps me when it comes to the all-round artistic control of my creative vision.

When I was in high school around 1963, my ritual was read-



ing "The Chinese Student Weekly". Law Kar was their film critic and his analyses had a big influence on me. Other topnotch contributors like Kam Ping Hing and Tin Gour also exposed me to their unique views on film, literature, culture and politics. I was very excited by this group of distinguished journalists. I befriended them by joining film clubs and attending youth seminars. They recommended books to me and I was introduced to the writings of Robin Wood and Andrew Sarris. I also became a member of Studio One, which was a film club that showed contemporary foreign films like the French New Wave. So I got to see the films and could read renowned critics' views on them. I think it was around 1967 when I first started working at TVB.

**AS: Can you tell us your journey from TV into film?**

**PT:** After I graduated from high school in 1967, my family, which has always been very liberal and also loved films, encouraged me to work at TVB, a new TV station which was getting ready to launch in three months time. There was only one other TV broadcaster at the time (Rediffusion) but its style was very archaic, dull and stolid. TVB seemed to be going for a different approach.

When I first started working there, their studios weren't even built, but everything else was an eye-opening experience, like my first encounter with video. I started out as a floor manager and I took the chance on learning editing. Later, I became responsible for program transmissions. Nowadays everything is computerized, but back then, every program or commercial that was broadcast had to be sequenced tape by tape and sent to transmission manually. I didn't stay in this position very long.

Selina Chow (who later became the director of programming at TVB) was a production assistant then. She knew that I was very interested in film, so had me work with her, to help review and purchase British dramatic series for TVB's English Channel. When Selina was producing the big hit *The Hui Brothers Show*, (starring the Hong Kong superstars Michael and Sam Hui), she wanted to have a 16mm film crew doing location shoots to complement the studio video footage of Sam singing, a rudimentary concept of music video in the 70's. Since she didn't have any crew members who knew 16mm in the programming department, she borrowed a cameraman from the news department. She wasn't happy with the result and knowing that I was a film enthusiast, she called me up and asked me if I wanted to give it a try. I took her up on her offer and she was very happy with the outcome. This was my first experience of directing.

After *The Hui Brothers Show*, I was promoted to director of *Wonderfun*, a magazine-style program on all things strange and funny. I compiled and edited the content from available footage and I shot the introduction and ending with a host on 16mm. Selina's next project was *Superstar Special*, a half-hour series shot on film with a movie star in a dramatic role in each episode. I directed prominent stars in this series, including Hsu Feng and Bai Ying (both featured in many of King Hu's films). Up to this point, there was still no official film unit established in the program department. Selina saw that my interest in film was genuine, so in 1976 she offered me an opportunity for training abroad. I picked a film workshop in a private studio near San Francisco and I spent about nine months there learning. I wanted to stay longer, but by then the film unit was established and she wanted me back to start a new series called *CID*

(*Criminal Investigation Department*). We started experimenting with sync sound shooting with the Nagra recorder, something completely new to us. Woon Kee Fee was a veteran news cameraman and Wu Hon Fung, an experienced sound recordist; they helped us overcome a lot of technical difficulties. We became good friends over the years; Wu recently worked for me as a sound recordist on *ATOE*. Eventually Tsui Hark, Ann Hui and Yim Ho all joined the film unit. I worked on a few more TV series as a director, then, after I had gathered enough experience shooting films, I left TVB and made my first feature, *THE SWORD*, in 1980.

**AS: Who are your favourite directors and what films have had a profound influence on you?**

**PT:** At the beginning, my favourite director was Bergman and I adored *Persona*. Later, when I was exposed to Godard, my taste shifted and Bergman's name fell as Godard's rose. But when Bresson came along, he captured my heart and he is on the top of my list now.

Topping my list of favourite films are films by Bresson, Max Ophuls, Murnau, Naruse, Godard's *Pierrot le fou*, *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*, and Bergman's *Persona*, which I still consider a masterpiece. It is really difficult to make a film like Renoir's *Rules of the Game*, and I admire his creativity tremendously. I don't think I'll be able to make a film like that, ever! Same with Fellini's *8 1/2* and *Amarcord*, such vibrant creativity!

I wasn't influenced by Chinese Cinema much, as when I was growing up in Hong Kong in the 50's and 60's, we didn't want anything to do with communism. I did go with some friends to try a couple of Chinese hits like *Third Sister Liu* (1961), but I found the film language too conservative, offering me no excitement.

I do appreciate the Cantonese Cinema produced by Hong Kong's Union Film Enterprise, films like *In the Face of Demolition* (1953). Actors like Ng Chor Fan and Cheung Ying are outstanding. My favourite Cantonese actress has always been Tsi Law Lin. She possessed such modernity! Apart from being an actress, she wrote and directed *Love In Malaya* (1954), which was unheard of for a woman in the 50's in Hong Kong. Her performances can definitely be compared to Ozu's favourite, Setsuko Hara. I found her even softer than Hara on the outside, but much stronger within, a perfect portrayal of the modern woman. You can sense her power even when she is not in the foreground. She is quite elderly now, but I think she deserves to be a subject of research and retrospective.

**AS: You tend to be very economical in your screen-writing style, especially in unfolding your story. Sometimes you convey a lot of emotion simply through a look or a certain action, as do the French New Wave films, instead of using intense dialogues as is common in Hong Kong or American movies.**

**PT:** I am, in fact, not very happy with my previous scripts. I used to collaborate with other screen-writers, but many inadequacies resulted from our collaboration. With *ATOE*, it's different as it was workshopped for many years with my students. I was involved with the script for a long period of time and I think I'm quite satisfied with it. In a drama, it's very important to get intense emotional conflict. You can either show an incident directly by acting it out in the open, or have it implied by an action or as an outcome in another scene. There should



always be interplay between these two methods: the presence or the hint. You grip your audience's emotions by selecting what you want them to see, and inspire them to fill in the rest with their own imagination.

It is also important to establish the focus of the film, and decide what else is not as important. Like the scene in *ATOE*, when the father was tracked down by the debtors and he was beaten up badly, the actual brutal violence is not important and therefore not shown. The audience can imagine it without seeing it. The dramatic story structure is thus economized to its most powerful. I believe that we should leave some room for the audience to participate in the story instead of spoon-feeding them with blatant information scene after scene. We need interaction between the filmmaker and the audience and it's meaningless if they just sit there and don't participate in an emotional exchange. A creative work comes to life when the maker connects with the audience through the bridge of imagination and mutual participation.

I write my characters first in my screenplays, instead of the plot. Take *Nomad* (1982) for example, I was reading Nietzsche's *Gay Science* and was inspired by his depiction of youthful energy. I looked around at the youths in Hong Kong in the early 80's and ideas came to me. I saw a refined middle class youth in contrast with another grassroots youth in a housing project, and the narrative gradually developed around these characters' concerns and needs, illustrating a cross-section of society at the time. Character should always come first. I watch Hitchcock over and over again not because of the plot—I got that right after the first time. I enjoy multiple viewings of Hitchcock's films because of the personalities—the characters and the errors they continue to make.

**AS: The taboo-breaking display of sexuality in *Nomad* and *Love Massacre* (1981) shocked Hong Kong audiences in the early 80's. Were you always interested in exploring sexuality?**

**PT:** Sexuality is only one aspect of a character. It may be big in one character and small in another. Sexuality has never been my main focus. My films are about the expression of emotions. I tend to consider some of my films the extreme externalization of strong emotions, which might be too powerful or difficult for some to handle.

Sexuality is a form of expression of human energy. What drives a character forward in a narrative is his or her desire. This desire could be sexual in nature. Even in *Persona*, when Bibi Andersen was relating her past orgy to Liv Ulmann, the scene was very sexual, but I don't consider sexuality the core of the film. In fact, I couldn't agree more with Robin Wood's comments when the film first came out. There were these two characters; one was withdrawn and repressed, whereas the other was out-going and expressive. Humans sometimes stand at one extreme of this characteristic spectrum, but it actually takes both traits to make a person complete. Sexuality is a drive in this relationship but it is not the focus of the film. In the opening montage sequence, Bergman's poetic collage of images demonstrates how the film language will operate to unfold the story. He alerts the audience about the artistic creation of a narrative through film images, film as a medium, and that, for me, is more important than the sexuality component.

Sexuality is a basic drive in every human being and it is indeed very important in a film. However, I have never con-

sciously emphasized this aspect in my characters. At the end of *Nomad* there was a scene in a commune, but I wasn't deliberately exposing sexuality in a group or homosexuality. I was exploring the breaking of taboo and the social code of sexual expression. That was my focus. My point was about the individual's liberation from the rules of society, the freedom to rebel, to break away from the norm and be your own self. I agree to the transgression of social boundaries. The establishment of society as an institution is in fact very corrupt and citizens should be liberated, not confined.

**AS: Are there any actors that you think possess some special chemistry that could best express his or her sexuality on screen?**

**PT:** Of all the actors I have worked with, I would consider Rachel Lee Lai-Chun in *Final Victory* as the actor who best expressed her sexuality on screen. Pat Ha Man-Jik in *Nomad* was another actor who could definitely seduce her audience by exposing her desire.

I also consider dream-like Kim Novak very mysterious and beyond man's control. She is very liberating as she reflects and brings out the weakness in man. She is lucid, like water and beyond your reach. That's why *Vertigo* is so powerful and if her character were played by some other actress, it wouldn't work the same way. I couldn't imagine Grace Kelly in this role as she would be too regal to be convincing. Recently, I have discovered that Scarlet Johansson possesses this seductive screen presence as well. You can't control her as no man on earth could possibly dominate her. Her expression of sexual confidence is very modern.

As for the films I've seen, I would consider Oshima's *In The Realm Of The Senses* (1976) a very important film in the exploration of sexuality. Transgression is important, as you can see from the role played by Eiko Matsuda; she was an ordinary maidservant but she expressed a carefree attitude towards her sexuality. That I consider very admirable. Sexuality really deserves to be investigated further, especially nowadays when people are so conservative. Youth today are confused; they think that they are rebellious but in fact they are not. They plan their future in a calculated manner, very down to earth, with a good money sense. They don't want to take risks and that limits their explorations. They may dress unconventionally or spray graffiti around town, but they would not dare to go hungry or to live and let live. They are not liberated from society and definitely not in their sexuality. Those youths who engage in sexual activities out of ignorance or innocence I do not consider liberated. Liberated youths mean to me those who have made a conscious decision, after serious consideration, to live out their desires contrary to social codes. These youths are missing nowadays, especially in Hong Kong.

**AS: You really are known for your artistic passion, your insistence on producing good work or not at all. I know that you are currently teaching at the City University of Hong Kong and people always ask the question, "Why teach when you can actually do it?"**

**PT:** It is, in fact, just as important to teach and prepare the next generation of filmmakers to carry the torch when my generation of filmmakers retires. Creative filmmaking was never easy and it's even harder now when the film industry is experiencing a downturn. You have to wait for inspiration as well as the



financial backing necessary for a project to materialize. It is particularly important for a creative filmmaker to take a stand. Is he going to produce a serious work which might need more resources, or he is just going to make some quick money and not necessarily produce refined works? Of course it is important to be creative, but when the environment is not conducive to making sincere works, one should explore other options. For the past seventeen years, when I didn't make films, I was making commercials, or teaching or editing other directors' work. I rather enjoy editing Wong Kar-Wai and Johnnie To's work. They rely a lot on improvisation; therefore they don't necessarily have their camera angles scripted. They cover a scene by running simultaneous cameras to capture the action from different angles. That gave me a wide variety of choices on the editing table. I have greater freedom of selection out of this extensive footage to create a vision according to my interpretation. Having this freedom has made the creative editing process very enjoyable. This is also creative work for me. It doesn't matter if the film is good or not, it gives me lots of pleasure just to edit. A director shouldn't be limited to directing only. Other capacities can also satisfy the creative mind while you are waiting for your next break.

There are opportunities out there for filmmakers who are truly talented. It's the same then and now. However, back in the 70's, it required more effort for those who wanted to pursue films. Films are a lot more accessible nowadays with the popularity of DVDs and the download culture. Since films are so accessible, young people nowadays do not appreciate them the way we did back then. There is also a greater variety of entertainment now and it is hard for young people to stay focused. Yet, to be able to concentrate and fight distraction is the key to creative success. This generation has a tougher battle to clear all these obstacles.

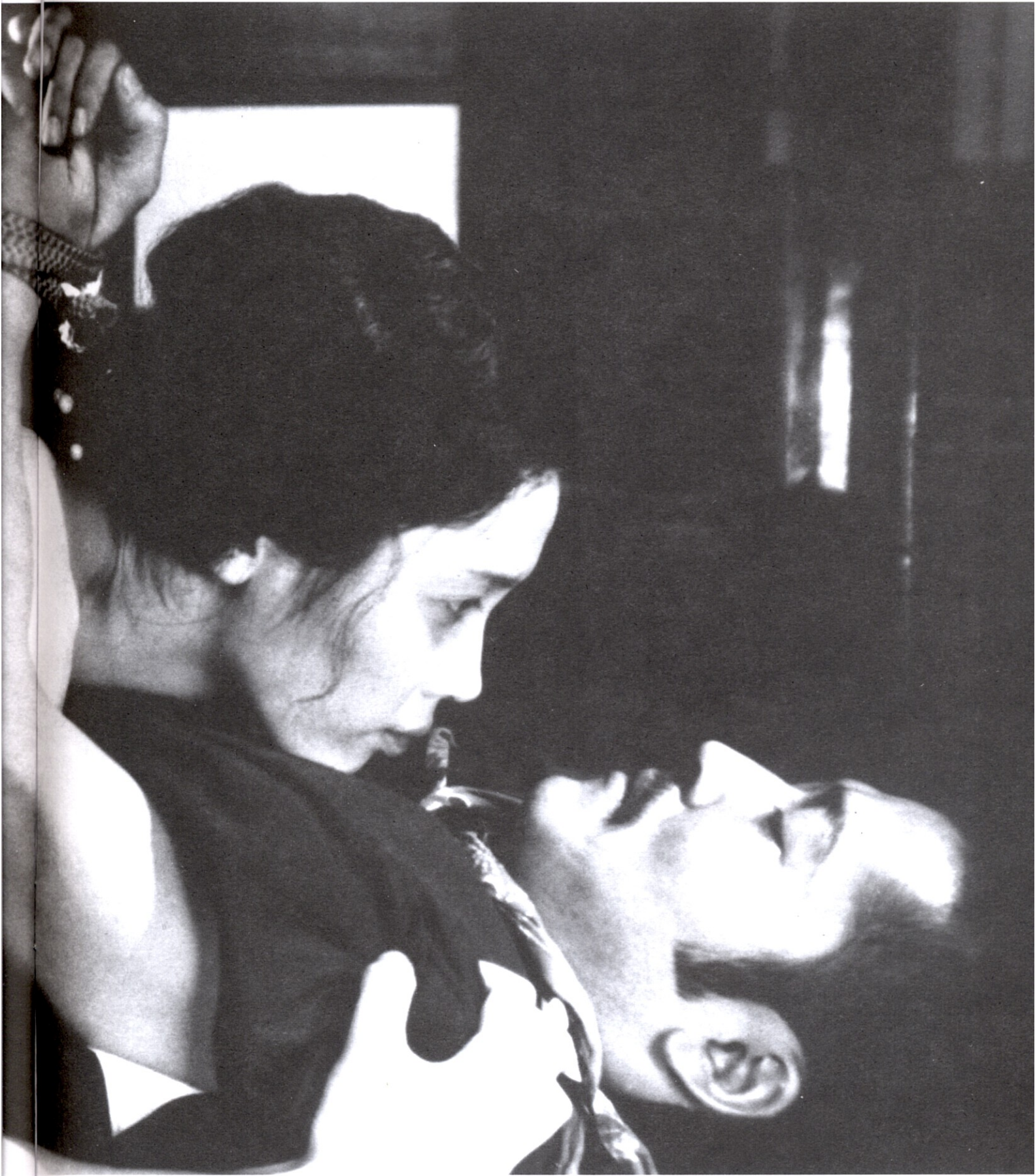
For a budding young filmmaker, I think it's very important not to be influenced or swayed by others too easily. With the popularity of the web and blogs, anyone is entitled to his or her own opinion. It is hard for the young generation to stand firm on their personal viewpoint amidst a world of chaotic ideas. When creativity is compromised by the masses, it becomes mediocrity as originality fails. I'm quite pessimistic as I see this generation's sense of values has changed and their thoughts are contaminated by a yearning for popularity. This is a dangerous phenomenon. Self-reflection is needed to keep a lucid mind, and patience is a virtue. Don't rush into production; your work will only turn out to be unsatisfactory and meaningless.

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### *In the Realm of the Senses*











# *In Dreams and The Gothic*

THE MOMENT OF COLLAPSE

CAROLE ZUCKER

"In [Irish] gothic realism..., a familiar *narrative* pattern is redeployed as in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *Carmilla*, and *Dracula*, the isolated individual who traffics with extra communal forces is destined to be consumed by them."

—M.G. Backus

"Ireland is the only country on earth, where, from the strange existing opposition of religion, politics and manners, the extremes of refinement and barbarism are united, and the most wild and incredible situations of romantic story are hourly passing before modern eyes."

—Charles Maturin



Neil Jordan is a director whose films, even when not dealing in an overt way with Gothic themes, characters or setting are marked by a Gothic spirit that is fraught with darkness and anxiety, tension and fear, all of which in the world of the Gothic become pleasure. The Gothic provides a counter-narrative to modernity, humanism and the enlightenment. As William Patrick Day writes: 'Gothic is a fable of identity fragmented and destroyed beyond repair.'<sup>1</sup>

There is a transformation from Romanticism as the disturbance moves inside, and starts to question identity, individuality, conventions of society. "Gothic fiction can be said to blur rather than distinguish the boundaries that regulate social life, and interrogate rather than restore any imagined continuity between past and present, nature and culture, reason and passion, individuality and family and society."<sup>2</sup> In contradistinction to Romanticism, there is no sense of possible redemption, and the imagination is granted no power over events. The Romantics were very concerned with origins and identity, whereas the Gothic breaks down identity. The world is seen as a place of fragmentation and chaos, disorder and defencelessness, especially for women.

The Gothic is a menace to the human soul through an overabundance of imagination, transgressive behaviours, and the lurking power of evil and spiritual corruption that undermine the moral authority of the individual. This may occur either through supernatural or natural forces. The mind itself may be denied wholeness or the ability to communicate pain to others. Corruption, irrationality and wickedness dominate the Gothic imagination.

The Gothic is more hidden, and less exteriorised than the Romantic. Terror for the Romantics came from without, but in the Gothic the destructive affect comes from within and is called horror. While the Romantics laboured to correct social inequities and pietistic thinking, in the Gothic, one can not even be certain about what is real or imaginary. The uncanny decomposes all boundaries and defines predominant social and moral laws. The Gothic subject is disconnected from his/her self as well as from society that surrounds them. Limits and control are unknown to the Gothic subject, or are placed in great doubt. In speaking of the Irish Gothic, the idea of the disconnect between self and society undergoes an interesting turn.

David Punter writes about two of the principle figurations in Gothic literature, the monument and the ruin as emblems of the uncanny. However, he claims that in the Irish (and Scottish) Gothic, upon closer inspection, the monument "... reveals itself as a ruin, as a thing of shreds and patches, as a location where, even if coherence can be felt, it will always be on the other side of a great divide, never immediately available to a life lived in the present."<sup>3</sup> As in many post-colonial narratives, memory and a sense of a coherent history are under the risk of elimination. In Irish and Scottish Gothic "specific modes of ghostly persistence ... may occur when ... national aspirations are thwarted by conquest or by settlement, as they have been so often. I want to show how the Gothic is especially powerful in rendering the complex hauntings in such confined histories."<sup>4</sup> Imagination and emotion are both disturbingly excessive and destructive, whereas for the Romantics they were a necessary stimulus to the act of creation. The irrational triumphs in the Gothic, and societal conventions are broken apart. At a most basic level, the Gothic questions sexual identity: what is

masculine? What is feminine? Obviously, this causes a departure from the safety of the family unit. The Gothic ruptures the basic ideas we have about culture, civilization and identity.

Neil Jordan's 1999 release, *In Dreams*, ostensibly a serial killer-thriller, was greeted almost universally with disapproval. This was all the more disheartening after the art house success of *The Butcher Boy* in 1997. One critic, while praising the visual qualities of the film, calls Jordan to task for "a flawed story line." After pointing out numerous unbelievable plot points, the writer then says, "it's clear that when the work was divvied up Robinson dominated the writing while Jordan concentrated on the direction."<sup>5</sup> In fact, the script written by Bruce Robinson (*Withnail and I*, writer/director, 1987) is a lugubrious talk-fest, most of which was deleted by Jordan, who still generously gave Robinson a co-writing credit. Yet *In Dreams* is very much an integral part of the Jordan oeuvre. It deals with thematics that can be found throughout the director's work: the importance of myth and ritual; the structure and meaning of fairy tales; a deleterious view of the family; violence and its attendant psychic and physical damage; questions about sexual identity; misguided longings for an ill-fated love; interrogations of masculinity; an attachment to the dream world; characters haunted by loss, and the fragile boundaries between the rational and irrational.

The film opens with raging water rapidly engulfing a church-like structure—a statue of Jesus floats by. The water bursts through a window, and shatters the glass. Then, after an elliptical transaction we see scuba divers gracefully wending their way through the pathways of a town that was flooded with water and submerged to create a dam. The subterranean swimmers are bathed in a blue light as they swim silently through the drowned town. Their flashlights create an eerie, otherworldly luminosity. From the outset, *In Dreams* is situated in an oneiric world that is at once ghostly and unrelenting.

The divers glide through a primary locale of the Gothic—the labyrinth: "a place of all forms of excessive, irrational and passionate behaviour, the labyrinth is also the site in which the absence or loss of reason, sobriety, decency and morality is displayed in full horror."<sup>6</sup> It is a disturbing opening that positions us within the world of the Gothic, and its attendant sense of despair and anxiety. We know this town was drowned to create a dam, but what are the divers searching years later?

The film's narrative traverses territory that is *unheimlich*, it negotiates a liminal space. The underwater town is the space of imagination, but at the same time it is an authentic place that was once inhabited by characters within the film's fictive world. The underwater town is interstitial; it resides at the intersection of the real and the imaginary. *In Dreams* is rooted firmly within the Gothic, tracing a path where all boundaries are blurred; it challenges social and cultural structures and extinguishes "any imagined continuity between past and present, nature and culture, reason and passion, individuality and family and society."<sup>7</sup> The framework of the world as we know it will collapse entirely during the course of the film.

We meet Claire (Annette Bening) and Rebecca (Katie Sagona), mother and child, as they recite lines for a school recital of *Snow White*. Rebecca performs, in a clever anthropomorphic Gothic gesture, 'The Mirror' (She is wrapped in shroud-like material that prefigures the raising of her corpse from the lake). They practice Rebecca's lines: 'Mirror, mirror on



the wall/ Who's the fairest one of all?'. Claire is an illustrator and adaptor of children's books; we find her looking at her adaptation of Grimm's fairy tales. The family is completed by Paul (Aidan Quinn), an often-absent airline pilot. The home tends to be a place of sanctuary in the Gothic, but here a host of narrative events sabotages this domesticity. The violation of the family house occurs in stages. First, Claire has disturbing dreams and premonitions. It is obvious from her husband's irritated response, ('Oh Jesus, here we go again,') that this is one episode in an ongoing series of episodes in which Claire has exhibited the power to dream or visualise events. Her apparent fragility is also contained in the exposition when Claire says: 'I guess I'm crazy again'. In this line we get a dollop of Claire's backstory. Because of prior articulations of her 'second sight', the psychiatric establishment considers her delusional. To muddy the portrait of 'the happy family' even further, it is then revealed that Paul has been having an affair with a flight attendant in Australia, thus accounting for his long absences. He rationalises his behaviour by complaining that because of Claire's obsession with the covert metaphysical world, he must seek intimacy elsewhere.

Claire has been dreaming of a series of child murders, and in fact, we learn in the opening moments of the film that another little girl has been killed. This prompts her husband to inform the police of her visions. But the officer in charge of the investigation treats the message as the jabberings of an unstable person, and in this he mirrors Paul's own quasi-skepticism. The weakness or absence of the rational is one of the defining characteristics of the Gothic. Each in turn: Claire's husband, the police, and a psychiatrist will disavow Claire's cognitive gift. Anne Williams writes:

**"These family 'scandals' of Gothic criticism...call attention to the importance of boundaries: the literal and figurative processes by which society organizes itself, 'draws the line,' declaring this 'legitimate,' that not; this 'proper' that not; this 'sane,' that not, rules and divisions that structure all dimensions of human life. Such 'lines' and 'boundaries' may be real, the cold, hard stone of the castle and cathedral...Such lines and walls both create the possibility of transgression and suggest the proper punishment for those rebels who cross them, who 'go too far': to be immured, incarcerated, imprisoned in the attics, dungeons, or secret chambers of the family or the state."**<sup>8</sup>

We watch the children perform the section of "Snow White" in which the huntsman is supposed to kill the girl as specified by her evil stepmother; the children in the play gather round the huntsman with his knife held aloft, chanting, "Please show mercy, please." This spooky scene prefigures the action of the film, but unfortunately for the murder victims, there is no mercy granted by the killer.

Paul leaves for work after the play and in a harrowing scene, Claire cannot find Rebecca amidst the gathering of gossamer-winged little girls. Claire comes upon the wings of Rebecca's costume on a boulder near the shore, and perceives instantaneously what has happened. Claire had foreseen another murder, but did not know the victim would be her own beloved daughter. At this point the film's antagonist/murderer has not been revealed, but he stealthily

leaves clues for Claire so that she will interpret his actions. The lake (which now covers the drowned town) is dredged for Rebecca's body, and before it is even brought to shore, Claire bounds into her car and drives at a great speed, smashing through an elevated guard rail into the water. This action initiates one of the film's most striking narrative tropes: Claire's willingness and desire to die.

In one of the film's later scenes, when Claire is incarcerated in a mental hospital, her dog barks outside for her attention. Claire climbs out of a window and follows the dog onto a crowded four-lane highway. A huge truck is quickly making its way toward Claire when it swerves to avoid her, slamming into numerous cars on either side. Claire remains unharmed under the body of the truck. This heightened scene, which seems extraneous to the main action, confirms Claire's status as "a special one." She is spared most improbably in the accident and housed safely under the truck that surely would have killed her. It can be seen as an act of divine or malefic intervention. Claire is spared in a most unrealistic way so that she can complete her mission and die—not peacefully, but as one absorbed into the omnipotent evil that guides the film to its baleful climax.

When Claire awakens six weeks later from a comatose state, she is upset that she has been brought back to life and to mourning. There is an ellipsis to Claire waking again in the hospital bed, as Paul sings 'Don't Sit under the Apple Tree'. She asks why he is singing that particular song, and Paul replies that she has been singing it in her sleep. Importantly, Claire says: "Someone was singing *through* me." This confusion between the self and other becomes one of the film's major themes. Claire is sent home; hair shorn, wearing an androgynous jean jacket and sneakers in contradistinction to the more girlish and feminine look she sported in prelapsarian times. Eve/Claire has eaten the apple, one of the film's predominant images. It is not only her innocence that will be stripped away, but her life as she knows it. The film also challenges the paradisaical notion of childhood, as it focuses on children's lives cut short by violence.

As the film progresses, when her husband attempts to make love to her, Claire is seized by a vision of the murderer who simultaneously kisses her, and whispers, "I know you've been dreaming about me, because I've been dreaming about you." As she fends off the kiss in her dream state, she vigorously bites her husband's lip in the reality of her waking world. The underlying idea of cannibalism and the "Dead World" throws the film into an ever more apocalyptic arena. Cannibalism is portrayed in fiction as evil and barbaric, where all the values and myths of a culture are inverted; the cannibal meal is not seen as communion, but as fragmentation and torment. The spilling of blood does not replenish the land, it is not redemptive as human sacrifice as it is often thought to be; the ritual dimensions of slaughter and cannibalism are lost and empty.<sup>9</sup> This aspect of anthropophagy ties in wonderfully well with the dark Carnavalesque traits of the Gothic.

Paul leaves for work, and what proceeds is a waking nightmare for Claire. The house is the defining symbol of what is right and normal; primitive anxieties erupt in the face of its violation. Such an intrusion occurs while Claire is in her home. First, she spills a bottle of red ink on her workstation.<sup>10</sup> As an illustrator, she designs on her Mac computer, and without her intervention, images of apples begin to fill the screen, cascading



across the monitor. Claire is startled by the sound of a child laughing and a barking dog; she runs outside and finds a swing in motion, an apple placed on the seat, and a radio that, plays "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" of its own accord. Claire smashes the radio to bits, and turns to the woods to look for her dog.

When Claire returns home, she smells something burning in the oven. As she enters the kitchen, apples overflow on every surface of the room. Although meant for the benign purpose of making apple sauce, the apples are a trigger for Claire's mounting anxiety and loss of control. She stuffs the apples into the garbage disposal unit with great fury. The machine then regurgitates its contents, vomiting pureed apples on Claire and the kitchen, in a scene that recalls the unstoppable water of the film's opening scene. Claire races upstairs and finds her computer typing messages of its own accord; the monitor fills with a response to, or repetition of, Claire's utterances. In an effort to rid herself of this disturbance, she heaves the computer out the window. We next see Paul as he enters the house—the walls are covered with graffiti, sentence fragments painted either in blood, paint or red ink adorn the walls and mirrors of the house. Claire lays prone on their bed, barely conscious; she has slit her wrists. The refuge of the home has now become untenable for Claire. It is a place that holds no comfort; it is a house transformed by unspeakable malevolence and affliction. David Punter writes about this transition as a reflection of the Irish Gothic:

He writes:

**"If [Shelley's] 'Ozymendias' is a quasi-Gothic myth that has to do with the fallen grandeur of past civilizations while continuing to assert their relevance as a warning to the continuity of national progress, then the myth in *Melmoth* [the Wanderer] goes one step further, as one might expect in an Irish context, and undermines the entire sense of memory and interpretation on which history is based. Whereas in England even a removed and subverted notion of tradition can remain relevant, here in the Irish context—as with the Scott's presents—there is no bedrock on which to stand. The Gothic removal of history does not suggest analogies to past civilizations or cultures, but rather exposes a terrifying abyss in an occupied land, the looming presence of a nonverbal 'history' that might be human or coherent at all, just as the issue of Catholic emancipation in Ireland hinged on the denial of human rights to the majority of the population."**<sup>11</sup>

This quotation is highly evocative of the narrative of *In Dreams*, for Claire, particularly, has the overwhelming void stretching out before her. Once she departs from her home, she loses her bond with life as she knew it. Her personal history, including family and work, evaporates, Claire's remembrance of and identification with her security and connection with normality is severed and she plunges into a chaotic world in which the words 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' no longer have a stable or coherent meaning.

Claire is now checked into the local psychiatric facility, her wrists bandaged. The psychiatrist (played by Jordan's *doppelgänger*, Stephen Rea) probes Claire, showing her photos of the scrawled on the walls:

DR. SILVERMAN

Did you write this Claire?

CLAIRE

(laughing edgily)

Yeah, but somebody made me do it.

DR. SILVERMAN

But who cut your wrists? Did someone make you do it?

CLAIRE

(laughter which turns to pain)

No, that was all my own work.

DR. SILVERMAN

But why Claire?

CLAIRE

(firmly)

I wanted it to stop. Can you dream when you're awake, when the sun's shining? I couldn't take it anymore, I'm not that strong.

Herein lies a dominant Gothic mode of thought: it is no longer the quest for identity (as in Romanticism), the issue now becomes the loss of the integrity of the self, a world in which wholeness is impossible.<sup>12</sup> Subjectivity and objectivity commingle, creating an indescribable horror.

Claire's self-mutilation ensues from the invasion of her identity by the 'Other'. Slitting her wrists is a way of rejecting the Other and its violation of her consciousness. The permeability of consciousness and the idea of crossing previously secure boundaries, is a thematic signature and a most frightening feature of the horror film. The idea of penetration, particularly since it is an invasion not merely of the body, but the mind as well, leaves Claire in a dehumanised and fragmented state that separates her from the human community. Claire is in some ways the ideal Gothic heroine, the Persecuted Maiden, and is also easily identifiable as "Freud's hysteric [. . .] her presumed passivity and lack of self-knowledge make her easy to diagnose."<sup>13</sup> It is then up to Claire to become her own analyser and analysand.

The invasion of the self by the Other is a primary image in the Gothic: "everything contains and becomes its opposite, the self is found in the Other and Other is in fact a face of the self."<sup>14</sup> At some point in the trajectory of the story, 'the threat is contained in the other half of one's self, and at a certain point, these two parts of a whole engage in deadly combat in which they maim or kill one another.'<sup>15</sup> This is precisely what ensues in *In Dreams*.

As Freud wrote in "The Uncanny": "We have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike. This relation is accentuated by mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another by what we should call telepathy so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other."<sup>16</sup>

The suggestiveness of the mirror and its incarnation in narrative mirroring is a basic Gothic figure. The mirror is the site of distortion, lack of balance, and perhaps most importantly, unreality. Foucault has interesting remarks about the mirror as a counter-site, in which the authenticity of the real world is contested by a space that inverts and challenges it.<sup>17</sup> The site of the Gothic is characterised by its heterotopia: all structures and landscapes are constituted by spaces that are omitted from the utopic world, "gothic machinery and the wild landscapes of



Romantic individualism give way to terrors and horrors that are much closer to home, uncanny disruptions of boundaries."<sup>18</sup> The 'I' represented in the mirror is an absent I, thus dislodging a sense of the real and the rational. It is one further example of the way in which the boundaries in the Gothic cease to exist. It is a melding, again, of self and other, "marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is."<sup>19</sup>

There is an extended sequence in Jordan's film in which Claire, now confined in a mental institution, becomes aware that she is inhabiting the same room as Vivian (Robert Downey, Jr., her Other), and starts to follow the same escape route he charted as a teenaged inmate. Once again a labyrinthian structure is centre stage—air ducts within the building's walls and ceilings. The scene is played out via intercut shots of Vivian in the past and Claire in the film's present tense. (This looks forward to the complex temporal structure in Jordan's next film, *The End of the Affair*). At one point, Vivian, dressed as a woman, asks the policeman, who has unwittingly picked up someone he believes is an attractive young girl, to drive him to the lake (and the drowned town). The cop asks "Why are we here?" to which Vivian responds, "This is my home." He then shoots the officer point blank. As water has such a potent archetypal association with women and birth, it creates a situation in which the anima and the animus merge. Vivian's maleness coalesces with that which is symbolic of the feminine.

The sense of doubling is made manifest not only in relation to Claire and Vivian, but with Claire and her own selfhood. She spends much of the film in a state of immense agony, emotionally and physically—for example, when she is forcibly strapped to a gurney in a rubber room. There are in fact, very few scenes of incarceration as painful to watch as Claire, drugged, not into oblivion, which she might welcome, but in a kind of quasi-anaesthetized stupor that only frustrates her attempts to com-

municate the agonising vision she has of her husband being slain. She is impotent with rage, and can do nothing. Her pleas are taken as a sign of her madness. It is the paradigm of heightened dramatic irony. She screams at the orderlies: "The bastard is in my brain and now he's murdering my husband!" As Steve Bruhm writes: "Pain evokes an antagonistic relationship between the body and the self, at the same time as that it allows no distinction between body and self: I hurt and I am being hurt; I hurt myself."<sup>20</sup> So, once again, we have a sense that the distinction between inner and outer are conflated in a tortuous scene of mortification. The sensation of pain is a constant in the Gothic world. In *In Dreams* this becomes all the more frightening when we see images of Claire shut away, unable to take action to save her husband. She is framed hanging limply on the glass door of the rubber room as the camera travels backwards; it is a devastating depiction of her isolation, sense of hopelessness and loneliness. One is reminded here of Vivian, abandoned by his mother to die in the drowned town, chained to his bed, lost and alone. Claire's empathy for Vivian's circumstances are spoken in a simple, but enormously touching response to the psychiatrist trying to understand Vivian's penchant for evil-doing, Claire says, "Maybe he's lonely."

Claire's fusion with death, as mentioned above, is shown beautifully in an intercut fantasy/dream/wish scene in which Claire, in a flowing red silk gown, walks in slow motion through the deserted corridors of the hotel in which her husband has been killed. (Red is once more used iconically, as a symbol of the fall, the apples, of blood, of Ruby the kidnapped child whom Claire will rescue). Claire is enveloped by deep despair and insupportable grief. Yet there is something graceful and serene in her carriage: She is the mistress of the house of the dead.<sup>21</sup> "Deteriorated places, neglected buildings, discarded streets and facilities may reveal a lack of common renewal, a failure of the fertile, creative spirit. Such corrupted places are

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outcroppings of a social system's underground, unadorned areas of the communal psyche."<sup>22</sup> The meltdown of Claire's identity and her alienation in a world no one can comprehend are critically important to the film.

**"By collapsing the distinction between the imaginative inside and the spectator outside, the play (*Cenci*) ultimately obscures the boundaries between privacy and publicity [...] Beatrice [the female protagonist] can no longer distinguish between what is happening to her physically and what is conjured imaginatively. And with no distinction between the inside and outside, she is unable to find refuge from her affliction; she can retreat neither to a private world cut off from the tortures of the outside nor to a communal sharing of her pain."**<sup>23</sup>

*In Dreams* herein shows its face as part of the Irish Gothic. It has been called an 'impure' and 'heterogeneous' genre, and is divided into two divergent master narratives: the paranoid gothic and gothic realism. Within the paranoid gothic sub-genre, the family unit is totalising and subsumes any criticism addressed to it. On the other hand in gothic realism "... texts have privileged homosexual and cross-class social alliances that pointedly undermine the family cell's ability to replicate itself."<sup>24</sup> Once her family is slaughtered Claire's private world is one which is inhabited by guilt. Although Claire takes an active role in hunting down her adversary (recalling the popular detective/androgynous figure of nineteenth century Gothic), she clearly suffers from the pathology of masochism. As Freud states in 'The Economics Problems in Masochism', the latter neurosis is the place where the libido and the death instinct meet head on. Claire mourns for her lost family, they are displaced by a bizarre family configuration of Vivian and another kidnapped child, Ruby. Vivian, who only appears physically in the film's final act, embodies a classic case of sadism, in which the destructive instinct, the drive for mastery and the will to power are the death wish turned to the external world. Claire is unable to externalise these drives, and therefore, would be considered a masochist. In 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud writes of the human instinct to preserve life through procreation by joining larger units. But this is coupled with a contrary instinct wishing to destroy those units and to return to an inorganic state, i.e. death. Vivian's wish to recreate the family unit is perverse in the extreme "...the elements of biological inversion in the gothic framework—the negation of all that is vigorous and life-beneficial [is an] extended trope turning on enfeeblement and deterioration—the absence of Eros."<sup>25</sup> Freud also wrote in 'The Uncanny' that the figure of the double revolves around a conception of self that is both sadistic and masochistic "the Gothic world comes to dominate and control the protagonists whatever their course of action, reducing them to the state of non-being, absorbing them into the other. The pattern of all relationships in Gothic fantasy ... operate on the dynamic of sadomasochism."<sup>26</sup>

The Gothic and *In Dreams* support this contention in the gender-bending central relationship between Claire and Vivian in which dominator and dominated continually trade places, and where the masculine and feminine selves become indistinguishable, "the haunted victim and the haunted persecutor ... each the other's obsession."<sup>27</sup> Vivian's sexual identity is

emblemized by his long flowing locks, his lengthy, manicured nails, as well as his given name, which can be either masculine or feminine. Claire, a feminised presence in the opening sequences of the film, becomes sexually neutered during the course of the narrative. Backus writes: "...the relationship between sexuality (especially homo-eroticism), liminality, division, and repetition in ...Irish literary Gothicism' is common-place in a "heterogeneous selection of texts."<sup>28</sup>

Vivian's experience of family life involves his neglect and punishment by his mother, whose power still dominates Vivian's disturbed mind. (She left Vivian chained to his bed, and did not return to free him when the town was flooded. Vivian saves himself, but the trauma he experienced has left him consigned to a psychiatric hospital.) Once Claire disturbs Vivian's inner sanctum, the "Good Apple" cider factory, their relationship changes, and the level of danger and the potential for annihilation is elevated. When Claire tries to free the little girl Ruby, Vivian anoints Claire the "Bad Mommy" and puts her in "Bad Mommy's" clothes, the same clothing worn by his own mother. (And which he apparently has worn too. Ruby says: 'When he plays Mommy... you should hear how his voice changes'.) He also says, obviously repeating something Vivian has told her: "Daddies can be just like Mommies.") So the family romance that Vivian plays out turns on the woman, his woman, the stand-in for the uncaring, punishing mother of his childhood. To be a mother is to be monstrous. As Barbara Creed has written: "definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection—particularly in relation to the following religious 'abomination': sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest."<sup>29</sup>

The representation of the mother figure in *In Dreams* is complex, and as with much else in the film, is an inversion of the notion of the 'normal' mother. Claire's insupportable guilt over the death of her only child leads one to consider Claire's qualities as a mother. The Earth Mother figure is crucial to fairytales, and can usually be found alone in a habitation that is surrounded by woods; she also has a connection with animals (Dobie, her dog, in Claire's case). Jung has written about the dualistic status of the Earth Mother (which reminds us of Yeats concept of the integrative and non-integrative woman):

**"[She] is associated with [ . . . ] maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcends reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants are presided over by the Mother. On the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate."**<sup>30</sup>

In the storytelling of Christian origin, very little is made of the more malefic side of the mother—the Virgin Mary the obvious case in point. Fairy tales incorporate "the dark points of the feminine principle or indeed the principle of evil," in the







maternal figure.<sup>31</sup> Here, the idea of “Bad Mommy” is an interesting explosion of the obsessively “good” mothers who protect and nurture their children. Claire has failed to save her daughter, in spite of her premonitions. In Jungian terms, Claire has, until this point, seen herself as positive representation of motherhood. With all the ominous signals that collect around Claire’s homelife, she encounters her dark side when she becomes “crazy,” but this does not exclude her perception of herself as Rebecca’s “good” mother. The more she fails to see how her darkness invaded her relationship with her daughter, the more evil, through the unconscious, will find a route to be released. Vivian’s mother is perhaps more honest in that she has abandoned any notion of supporting her son even in the most basic way.

As Vivian says when they enter the cider factory, “We’ll have pisketti for lunch.” He reverts back to his child self, trying to recuperate the family that he lacked. Gaylyn Studlar has said that masochistic desire depends on separation, not consummation, and that to fill this desire, to achieve orgasm means death.<sup>32</sup> Claire’s safety, although not her sanity, was ensured when Vivian was only a phantom presence. But sharing a bed with him, although no sexual relationship is imaginable, now brings her closer not to orgasm, but to the death spasm she will experience as the film climaxes. The two figures are locked in a mutual vortex of violent psychotic fragmentation, in which Claire is willing to do anything to secure the safety of the child, obviously a displaced version of her own daughter. Claire in a state of agitation and guilt, stops at nothing to physically and emotionally entrap Vivian and play upon his greatest fears. If we can see the three forming an ever-shifting triadic Oedipal arrangement, the lack is the sexual coupling of Daddy and Mommy, and instead the threat of castration hangs in the air, each half of the double terrorising the other physically and psychically. “Rather than fertility, however, horror centres upon withering; rather than on renewal, it focuses on degeneration; rather than on an intrepid human vitality, it centres upon the eminently assailable human body and the deep-rooted anxieties it situates.”<sup>33</sup> Claire, dressed in Vivian’s mother’s clothes begins tapping her foot, arms held akimbo, a scene of Vivian’s past that Claire was privy to in one of her visions. It is a dangerous strategy, but as Vivian panics, he becomes once again the little boy chained to the bed, and Claire is able to buy some time for Ruby to escape.

The ending of the film has Claire and Vivian battling it out. Their family is one of “collapse, a broken, ironic version of fertility rite radical destabilisation and disconnection. Ritual fragments are deeply significant to the horror aesthetic—ordeals, labyrinth, the journey underground.”<sup>34</sup> Now outside on a bridge, Claire and Vivian are in a pitched struggle, each wielding their own weapon as the police helicopter hovers above, ready to shoot Vivian. Claire and Vivian fall into the lake of the drowned town. Claire dies, precisely as she foresaw in a dream. Clearly, there are ritualistic aspects to her death in water. As she begins to float to the surface, bathed in a lambent light, she encounters her daughter:

REBECCA

Mirror, Mirror on the wall who’s the fairest of them all?

CLAIRE

You are, darling.

REBECCA

No, you are.

Is Rebecca claiming that Claire’s ultimate and most beautiful victory is her martyrdom and death?

The conversation between the revenants continues:

REBECCA

Come with me.

CLAIRE

Where darling?

REBECCA

Home.

It is an eerie reminder of the young Vivian’s reference to the water as *his* home. It is interesting to note that in Neil Jordan’s shooting script, *In Dreams* ends, disconcertingly, with this scene of Rebecca and Claire; we behold beatitude, comfort and signs of the numinous. In the finished film, however, Vivian, who survives the fall into the lake, is put away for life for his crimes. He walks to his cell, and with the introduction of each new element of his environment, Vivian says, ‘I can live with that’. He is complacent until he is shocked out of sleep by a corporeal Claire who says: ‘Pleasant dreams’, and violently bites his lip. Vivian looks in a mirror, and an off-screen hand reaches out and smashes his face against the glass. Suddenly words are incised into the walls and ceilings of the cell, reading ‘Sweet dreams, Vivian,’ as the blood red inscriptions liquefy and drip down the walls. Claire has now become the sadist, as she will control Vivian’s life as long as he lives. Vivian begins to scream, and much like the scene of Claire’s horrifying bondage in the asylum, Vivian presses his face against the window, shrieking in terror. “In death, the protagonist becomes, not simply a victim, but fully a part of what tormented him. Death releases the protagonist from the last vestiges of human identity, and he becomes the embodiment of cruelty and terror.”<sup>35</sup>

It is striking how much the work of cultural philosopher/literary critic René Girard’s seminal book, *Violence and the Sacred*, can illuminate and broaden one’s understanding of *In Dreams*. His chapter called ‘From Mimetic Desire to the Monstrous Double’ contains a different formulation for the use of the word mimesis than that of other scholars. He uses it to cover a whole range of things, it is a mechanism that generates the formation of personality, patterns of human interaction, belief systems and cultural practices. What he says, is that we have to understand the relatedness of mimesis and desire, something that rarely comes into any theories that explain human agency. He deals with the way in which humans work and why we do what we do. One of the main points of his argument is that people are wrongly thought to desire spontaneously. In fact, human desire is mediated (or mimetic). People desire because of others, not because of their own preferences. Mimetic structure, for Girard, is the basis of human experience. These interactions are based on desiring in terms of others—what he calls ‘non-instinctual’ and sees as the starting point for both archaic and modern belief systems and emotions that form human society.<sup>36</sup>

Girard discusses the role of violence in awakening desire, something we now call the pathology of sado-masochism because we believe that ‘normal’ desire is non-violent. What Girard calls “the sacrificial crisis” is for him, a universal phe-



nomenon in which violence becomes the "instrument, object, and all-inclusive subject of desire."<sup>37</sup> He opposes Freud's notion of the death instinct, which Girard calls "a surrender to mythological thinking"<sup>38</sup> and something that takes us back to a belief in Fate, the gods, and other agencies who control human behaviour. The mimetic impulse is spurned, but this only strengthens the desiring person's wish. Therefore, Girard says, desire and violence are forever linked in the mind. These spiralling energies, rather than staying on the level of conflicting desires, become channelled into a ritual form. It is not good vs. evil that is at the base of modern interpretations of the spirit of tragedy, but cycles. This cycle of alternation forms a relationship, fundamental to the relationships in tragedy, it is not the province of a single individual.<sup>39</sup>

Every act of violence, whether verbal (e.g. an insult) or physical, seems to be the ultimate blow, but actually, it is only a way station moving toward the next act of violence. Girard makes the evocative statement that 'desire clings to violence', because violence is the signifier of the cherished being, the signifier of divinity.<sup>40</sup> (Girard : 151).

All of these alternations and cycles lead to what Girard calls the 'Vertigo of Violence', reversal after reversal after reversal occurs, until the feeling of dizziness overwhelms the perception of reality. Their very souls and their being are seized in this irresistible, Dionysiac whirlwind of violence that captures everybody in the eye of the storm. What happens is the creation of a phantasmatic state—it's not something people experience together, but a kind of bizarre, antic mixing together of elements which might normally be perceived of as separate.<sup>41</sup> Once again, the notion of the dark carnival is invoked. Here Girard parts company with traditional sociologists. They try to classify this kind of grotesquerie as monstrous, with the participants as monsters. Girard sees these monsters as doubles, something that obscures the idea of difference. In the mental space that is created by simultaneous unity and difference, the opposing parties have unanimity only by acknowledging the monstrous double, which then becomes the object of violence. In this atmosphere of horror and hallucination at the peak of hysteria—the monstrous double is everywhere at once; an act of violence is sanctified against this double—but it is them.<sup>42</sup> The subject becomes caught up in the spirit of possession, and feels invaded psychically, physically by a supernatural creature—God/spirit/Demon who possesses one's soul. Possession is an extreme form of alienation—'me and not-me'—in which one completely absorbs the desires of the other. It is now no longer mimetic, but has internalised the other.<sup>43</sup> This provides a wonderfully clear description of the path and the outcome of *In Dreams*.

Neil Jordan's overarching aesthetic strategy is to locate the fantastic and the uncanny in an otherwise realistic setting. This aesthetic form then allows for the uncanny to surface and to bring with it things like the diabolical form of the numinous and the *heimlich-heimlich* (the secretly repressed). Jordan marries the prosaic world with the poetic, the physical world to the spiritual world, the world of the beautiful to the world of darkness and terror. All boundaries are left in question. It is at this crossroads that we find the films of Neil Jordan. Nowhere is this more evident than in *In Dreams*, a work that is fully equal to Jordan's best films.

**Carole Zucker** is publishing "The Cinema of Neil Jordan: Dark Carnival" in the fall of 2007. She has written three books of interviews with British, Irish, and US actors and has published extensively in *Cineaste*; *Cinema Journal*; *The London Times*; *The Globe and Mail*; *Film/Literature Quarterly*; *Film Quarterly*, and *CineAction*.

#### Notes

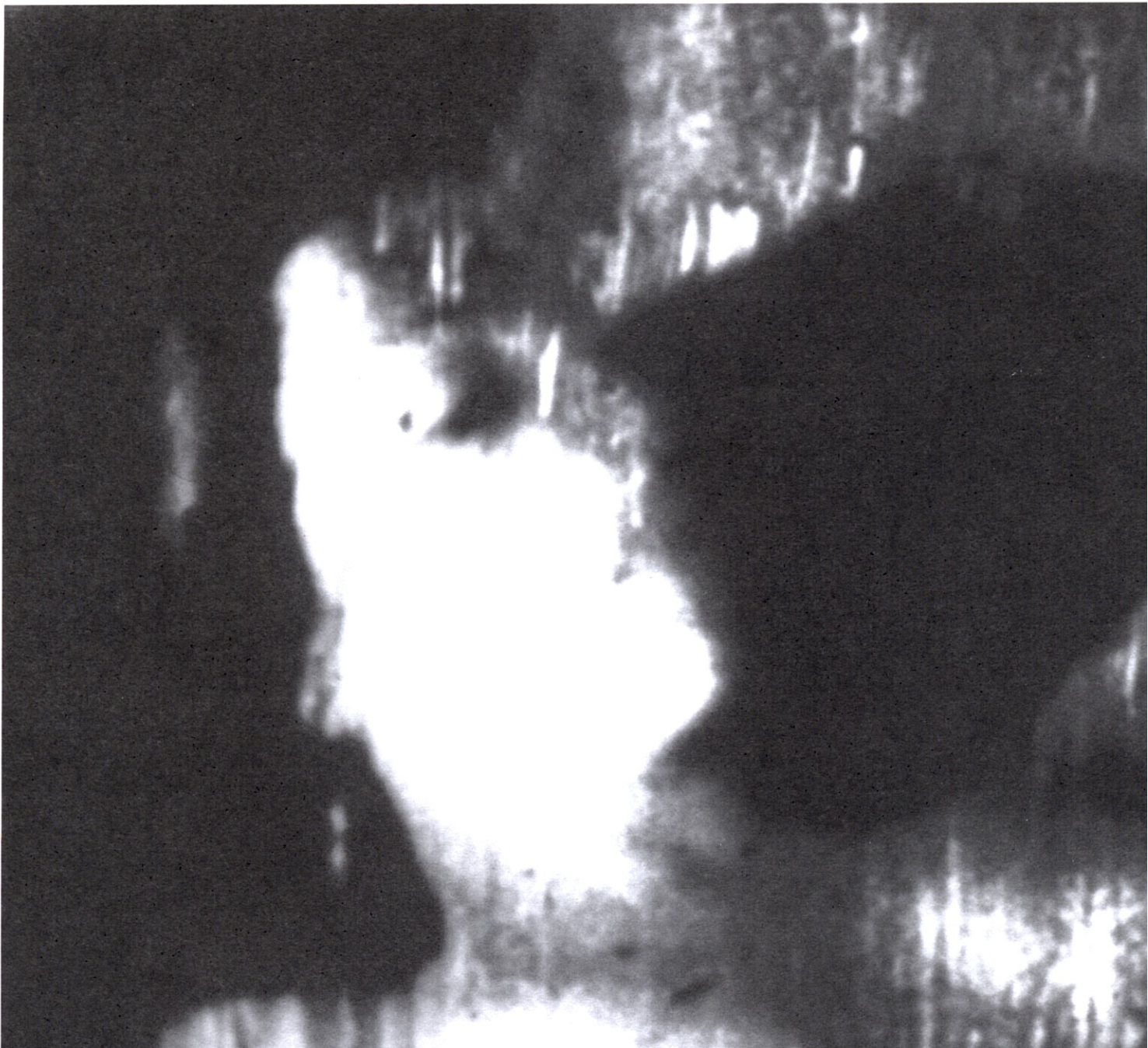
- 1 W.P. Day, *In The Circles of Fear and Desire* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), 6.
- 2 F. Botting, *The Gothic* (New York : Routledge Press, 1996), 47.
- 3 D. Punter, "Scottish and Irish Gothic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold F. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 118.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 5 M. Gray, "Review of *In Dreams*," *Film Ireland*(April/May 1999): 36-37.
- 6 Botting, *The Gothic*, 83.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 8 A. Williams, *Art of Darkness : A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 12.
- 9 C. Sharrett, "The Idea of the Apocalypse in *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*," in *Planks of Reason*, ed. B. Grant (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 266.
- 10 This action is reminiscent of Nicolas Roeg's film *Don't Look Now* (1973), when the character played by Donald Sutherland spills red ink on the slides he is working with, and moments later loses his daughter in a drowning incident. The coursing ink is an omen of the blood that will be spilled later in the film. The match of the spilled ink and the dead daughters connects the films in a very concrete way.
- 11 Punter, "Scottish and Irish Gothic," 120.
- 12 Day, *In the Circles*, 120.
- 13 M. A. Massé, "Psychoanalysis and the Gothic," in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. D. Punter (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 234.
- 14 Day, *In the Circles*, 75.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 16 S. Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume 18, Trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 234.
- 17 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 3-16.
- 18 Botting, *The Gothic*, 156.
- 19 Freud, "The Uncanny," 234.
- 20 S. Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 9.
- 21 A parallel may be drawn to Frankenstein's monster (Boris Karloff) in *The Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935), when after the female (Elsa Lanchester) is constructed by Dr. Frankenstein (Colin Clive) for the monster, she is repelled by him. The monster then proceeds to destroy the laboratory, with himself, the she-monster and the elderly mad scientist (the inimitable Ernest Thesiger trapped inside. It is an apocalyptic ending, and before the monster dies, he repeats, over and over: 'We belong dead'.
- 22 J. Morgan, *The Biology of Horror*, 185.
- 23 Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies*, 89-90.
- 24 M. G. Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 240.
- 25 Morgan, *The Biology of Horror*, 197.
- 26 Day, *In the Circles*, 19.
- 27 L.A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Dell, 1966), 131.
- 28 Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance*, 155.
- 29 B. Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. S. Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 251-256.
- 30 S. Birkhäuser-Oeri, *The Mother: Archetypal Image in Fairytales*, (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1988), 14.
- 31 *Ibid.*, *The Mother*, 19.
- 32 G. Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*. (Illinois: University of Illinois press, 1988), 19.
- 33 Morgan, *The Biology of Horror*, 85-86.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 88.
- 35 Day, *In the Circles*, 7.
- 36 R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), 146.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 145.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 161.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 143-168.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 161-165.



# Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* as Erotic Self-Portraiture

SHANA MacDONALD

The birth of the women's movement across Europe, the UK and North America during the 1960s had an impact on the New York art scene in which Carolee Schneemann played a major part. Alongside her contemporaries Meredith Monk, Rachel Rosenthal, Yvonne Rainer and Yoko Ono, Schneemann's films and performance work became a catalyst for the emergence of feminist consciousness in this sphere. Schneemann was a forerunner of performance art and new media installations before there were terms in place to describe such work. However, up to 1968, women artists working in performance were marginalized in both the realms of production and exhibition, thus little critical attention was paid to such works. It was not until art works by this group of female artists shifted the "collective thinking about art" that the imbalance in the New York art world began to change.<sup>1</sup>





Schneemann's particular experiences of marginalization extended beyond the visual and performance art circles of 1960s New York. She was also struggling both against sexism within the avant-garde film movement she contributed to and against neglect by feminist film theorists. This paper suggests it was Schneemann's emphasis on the primacy of the female body as tool of feminist resistance that marginalized her work amongst such theorists. At the time, the newly emerging feminist consciousness in film theory was uncertain how to incorporate the sexualized, erotic and self-produced image provided by Schneemann. For most feminist theorists, it was indistinguishable from the objectified female image actively being resisted.

David James locates the unique position feminist film criticism found itself in during women's liberation struggles in the 1960s and 1970s as one with a "double relation" to cinema. Women's particular exploitation in cinema "corresponded not to their exclusion from the filmic but to hyper-exposure within it...a use that was thought ipso facto to objectify women and to repress their own sexuality."<sup>2</sup> In light of this, Schneemann's film *Fuses* was "defused and diffused by the terror (her) vision evoked."<sup>3</sup>

Early feminist audiences did not meet the overt sexuality of a female subject of *Fuses* warmly. Rich<sup>4</sup> reflects that during one particularly heated screening audiences

**were outraged by... Carolee for giving head...out there on the screen. The practice was ruled subservient and antifeminist. A woman, any woman, performing a blowjob, bigger than life, on film, was not yet acceptable...The fact that Carolee was simultaneously "actor" and director was lost on [the] crowd.**

What is troubling is that traces of these early strains of feminist thought have shaped and created our present perspectives, and can still be found operating in contemporary feminist film theory. The misreading of Schneemann's work, then and now, indicates that early influential critical positions need to be reassessed for what they *left out*.

Reflecting on early feminist films from the 1960s, and on Carolee Schneemann's film *Fuses* in particular, I wish to propose a generic category indexing a particular trajectory within the history of feminist film practice. The proposed category—erotic self-portraiture—describes self-reflexive films in which the artist's body figures prominently as an erotic subject. Although there are many instances of erotic self-portraiture present in the corpus of feminist cinema, it remains an under-explored area within film theory. In outlining the parameters of this category I hope to provide a frame for the productive engagement with female-authored films, which may have been overlooked in the formation of the feminist film canon.

There are three central elements that define erotic self-portraiture as a generic category. First, such films are self-shot, thus freeing themselves from the control of an external, potentially misogynistic eye. Second, erotic self-portraiture asserts the presence of the female body as a site of pleasure and desire—as something to be celebrated, not merely consumed. Third, is the use of hand processing techniques<sup>5</sup> within such films, effectively inserting the embodied presence of the artist into the act of

production.<sup>6</sup> Through an investigation of *Fuses*, I wish to suggest that erotic self-portraiture provides a crucial intervention into both conventional cinematic representations of female sexuality and the discourse surrounding such representations within feminist film theory.

At the 1967 Cannes Film Festival Carolee Schneemann screened her film *Fuses* to both critical acclaim and public outcry. *Fuses* is a twenty-two minute lyrical film about sexual intimacy. The film explores sexuality from Schneemann's perspective as both subject and filmmaker. The first film in Schneemann's *Autobiographical Trilogy*, it has been described as "a new copulation between the filmic and the erotic."<sup>7</sup> In *Fuses*, Schneemann combines photographic footage of sex between her and her partner James Tenny with layers of collaged paper, painting and tinting added directly to the celluloid. Her texturally mediated representation of sex sensually evokes a complex experience of cinematic eroticism. The combination of light, color, abstract and photographic images challenges standard representations of sex in dominant cinema, promoting an alternative erotic cinematic language. The film is both a feminist response to patriarchal representations of female sexuality and, as part of the 1960s avant-garde, a critique of dominant cinema.

Throughout its forty-year history *Fuses* has been alternately celebrated and censored, constantly finding itself at the center of intense criticism as obscene and narcissistic. In response to such negative reactions, Schneemann has questioned whether her works of art, film and performance are censored and seen as obscene because they are "self-shot, without an external controlling eye."<sup>8</sup> She further questions whether it is her presentation of her body as "a locus of autonomy, pleasure, desire" as well as her insistence that she can be "both image and image maker," that has produced contestations over her work.<sup>9</sup> These observations outline clearly the key characteristics of erotic self-portraiture. Schneemann recognizes that what is found most obscene in her work is the lack of an external gaze. She acknowledges the contentious space she holds as both the image and image-maker, highlighting how this position challenges the binary opposition in conventional film theory between an active voyeuristic spectator and passive object displayed on screen.

Schneemann notes that her decision to place her body as the central focus of her work was inspired by the fact that she "was permitted to be an image but not an image maker creating her own self-image."<sup>10</sup> Being an image and not the author of the image illustrates a crucial distinction between object and subject that Schneemann explores extensively in her work. Schneemann alludes here to the bind women face as the primary object of representation by male artists while never being accorded the chance to enact their own subjectivities in art practice. In response, Schneemann positions herself "not as sex object, but as willed and erotic subject, commanding her own image."<sup>11</sup> This distinction between sex object and active erotic subject reveals the motivation behind Schneemann's extensive use of erotic self-portraiture in her films.

There are several questions that arise when the filmmaker places herself in the dual role of author of the image and the image represented. The most pressing question is: what is the difference between the terms *sex object* and *willed erotic subject*? And in the particular case of cinematic erotic self-portraiture, it



must be asked how an artist expresses this distinction formally in cinema? At the beginning of an article on censorship, Schneemann states:

**Bullets of projection are aimed into our bodies: trajectories of phallocratic apprehension produce our "wounds." A smoking gun grasped in that frozen hand. There's a cock/dick tracing this Saturday Night Special directed at our "privates." Projection deforms perception of the female body.<sup>12</sup>**

This passage points to the cinematic production of the "sex object" Schneemann positions her work against. She defines here a "sex object" that is projected on to film through the visual language of patriarchal desire with the purpose of consumption/spectacle/climax/ejaculation. Schneemann demonstrates how language, desire and image combine in the multiple manifestations of the word projection: the film's projection intermingles with the projection of male desire. For Schneemann these combined projections do not accurately portray the female human body, they deform it.

Despite the fact that much of Schneemann's early work includes her naked image, her films and performances critique the standard framed sex object. Her representation of female sexuality in *Fuses* does not adhere to any particular code of mainstream film or art. Her image is not contained or framed by an identifiable male gaze. She does not portray the filmic image of herself as submissive or performing to please the audience. She is part of a sexual union, represented equally amongst two desiring subjects. The camera does not privilege one lover's point of view or pleasure over the other.

In *Fuses*, Schneemann suggests a definition of the erotic that is absent in most contemporary images concerning the body, a definition of the erotic that is representative of the unconstrained, fluid experiences of pleasure, that some may link with the term *jouissance*<sup>13</sup>. An editorial on Schneemann's work in an underground New York City weekly written from the late 1960s defines the erotic as "that which somehow moves you out of yourself... You are no longer you, just as in moments of orgasm, climax, highest of the highs, you are more and less than yourself because someone or thing is affecting you too much."<sup>14</sup> This definition of the erotic greatly contrasts the same author's view of porn as something "fraternal, comforting, allowing you to remain you and look at something else."<sup>15</sup> A distinction is made here between something removed from oneself and something that has the capacity to undo the boundaries of the self in the face of an overwhelming sense of pleasure. This definition of the erotic indicates the presence of an experience that exceeds the limits of an individual's discursive position, or again, something akin to the idea of *jouissance*. Through this definition, a distinction between "sex object" and "erotically willed subject" is revealed.

In *Fuses*, Schneemann does not offer direct stimulation for a voyeuristic audience. The film's sexual imagery is intercut with shots of her cat (who she acknowledges as the voyeur of the film), with shots of a flaccid penis, Schneemann running on a beach, her lover driving in a car, abstract textures, colors and forms, all evoking the sensuous but not the sexually objectified. B. Ruby Rich describes *Fuses* as "a devastatingly erotic, tran-

scending the surfaces of sex to communicate its true spirit, its meaning as an activity for herself and, quite accurately, for women in general."<sup>16</sup> In her description of *Fuses*, Rich observes how the film exceeds the limits of structured cinematic codes, acknowledging Schneemann's direct challenge to the dominant forms of representing women erotically in film. The film displays a boldness, curiosity and enthusiasm around both the desires and pleasures of sex from a female perspective. The film celebrates the representation of female erotic experience as a worthy subject of cinema. The pleasures of sex are diffused throughout the film, subverting our expectations of the mechanics of heterosexual sex. As a heteronormative vision of sex in dominant cinema does not seriously take into account female pleasure, and at best provides a very distant approximation of the complexities of female desire, Schneemann's vision of sex is potentially more accommodating to women.<sup>17</sup> *Fuses* proffers a filmic space where the sexualized female object turns into a willing subject deriving pleasure from actively creating her own erotic cinematic image. Schneemann is not posing for the desire or pleasure of a male audience. Rather, her desire in making the film was both as an intimate exploration of herself and to open up the boundaries that North American culture imposes on sexual pleasure. Aware of the taboo power of the erotic female image, Schneemann employs it as a means of celebrating and liberating female pleasure from a dominant male gaze.<sup>18</sup> Through this erotic self-portrait, Schneemann creates a new language, a new economy of visual representation.

Pioneering feminist film critics such as Laura Mulvey, Claire Johnston, E. Ann Kaplan, Annette Kuhn and Mary Ann Doane wrote about what David James has called the hyper-exposure of sexualized female imagery within cinema at the emergence of the feminist film movement<sup>19</sup>. This early writing moved away from examining films containing erotic female bodies, irrespective of who made the films and what sort of politics informed them. Sexualized female images were seen as objectifying on all accounts. Taken to its extremes this line of thinking hinted towards a removal of the sexual female image from cinema. Rich locates this problematic turn in feminist film theory as an "overvaluation of the production aspect of cinema" and a "mis-assumption that cinematic values are irrevocably embedded at the level of production and, once there, remain pernicious and inviolable."<sup>20</sup> The crucial point to take from Rich is that such an analysis reinforces the view that, "[w]oman is absent on the screen and she is absent in the audience."<sup>21</sup> The paradox here is that in negating or suppressing the female image from cinema, these theories silenced and disempowered women from being active participants in the filmmaker/spectator dialogue even more. Women were becoming critical of the dangers of objectification but at the risk of removing a female imaginary from the screen. This paradox still rests uncomfortably on the minds of feminist film theorists; however, erotic self-portraiture suggests a mode of production that through its self-conscious actualization of the female erotic challenges the dangers of objectification in dominant cinema.

Laura Mulvey posits in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that within patriarchal culture woman is "a signifier for the male Other" and that in this role of signifier she is 'tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning."<sup>22</sup> This observation reflects Schneemann's previously cited observation that



women were permitted to be an image but not the producer of their own image. Both Mulvey and Schneemann reaffirm that up until the late 1960s and mid 1970s women were mostly the model and the muse, not the author or artistic visionary.

Mulvey constructs the spectatorial gaze as a male gaze that objectifies a female image. This female image is thus always represented as passive in classical narrative cinema. Mulvey notes the need for alternatives to this Hollywood narrative model, an alternative that would "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics."<sup>23</sup> Mulvey believes alternative cinema's resistance to the tri-subjugation of the female image could effectively remove any satisfaction gained by the 'male gaze'. While it was not Mulvey's intent to examine the avant-garde, *Fuses* offers an example of an alternative cinema that successfully subverts the triad male gaze of dominant cinema. As was previously discussed, *Fuses* holds at its very center an implicit challenge to the desirous gaze, offering an active, desirous female gaze back to the audience both on screen and in the production of the film.

The dual function of image and author explored by Schneemann in *Fuses* forces a reconsideration of the male gaze. As *Fuses* does not work in a conventional narrative, the gaze thus functions differently from that of its narrative counterpart. *Fuses* subverts the three types of gazes outlined by Mulvey (that of the camera, the male actor and the male spectator)<sup>24</sup> in favor of an integrated plurality of gazes. The gaze of the characters looking at each other in *Fuses* does not privilege a male gaze over a female or vice versa. Similarly, the gaze of the camera in the film—controlled by Schneemann filming Tenney or Tenney filming Schneemann—does not allow for a single identification within the film. David James notes in his examination of the film that;

**Schneemann made her own vision, one that addresses the phallogentric imbalance...Thus reproduction of gender in power relations in the profilmic or in the control of the apparatus was avoided, as was phallogentric distribution of roles – the male as the scopophilic subject and the female as the object.<sup>25</sup>**

Schneemann's filmic language opposes the spectatorial male gaze by providing a polyvalent unidentifiably gendered gaze of her and her partner. This opposition is further reinforced by the uncertainty of who or what you are viewing when watching the film.

While Mulvey's article is a germinal and historic account of sexism in narrative systems of cinema, the proliferation of her conception of the male gaze has produced some problematic discourse that disavows the production of meaning occurring at the site of spectatorship. Equally problematic within discussions of the gaze outside of Mulvey, is the restriction of **spectatorship to male spectators. A double negative appears, discouraging women from having agency both at the level of production and reception.** My negotiations with Mulvey's influence on feminist film theory lead me to question again what is lost or marginalized when female desire, sexuality and bodily experience are not considered in critical feminist discourse, spectatorship and film practice. I believe it is the loss of embodied

experience in theory that is the most problematic aspect of this double negative.

Reviewing the characteristics of erotic self-portraiture, I would like to argue that there is an additional gaze that Mulvey does not include in her discussion. Mulvey's omission of this gaze I believe is for a good reason as it I would say rarely exists in narrative cinema, which was her primary focus in the article. The additional gaze I wish to discuss is not direct but rather implicit within the production process. It is a gaze produced by the filmmaker when visually altering the film through hand processes. This gaze, located in the production of the image, is enabled by the filmmaker physically altering the image. In doing so the filmmaker is implicating her body in the realm of film production. This additional, tactile, mediational gaze has liberating possibilities for the feminist artist and spectator alike.

The use of abstract, non-photographic images in *Fuses* frees the viewer from any one conclusive reading, allowing creative free will to produce multiple connections and inferences. For example, the continuous flow of patterned, viscous, red paint blackened and baked on to the celluloid can suggest a variety of associations for the viewer depending on how they read this combination of colors and texture sensually. The extreme close up of skin and bodies outside of a gendered referent also affects how the viewer reads the sex acts being represented. These filmic manipulations produce a literal blurring of boundaries between photographic and abstract images or between dominant and experimental formal tendencies. By adding and taking away from the images, infusing them with collaged and painted responses to the existing footage, the filmmaker is able to express desires and visions unmediated by the camera. This gaze creates an awareness of the artifice of the medium and the camera and distances the audience through the acknowledgment of such artifice. At the end of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey argues that to "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics" can remove any satisfaction gained by the 'male gaze'.<sup>26</sup> *Fuses* succeeds in doing this through its pluralization of gazes and its hand manipulation of the film. The recognition of this additional gaze of the filmmaker who manipulates the photographic image through her bodily interactions with the celluloid, offers us another perspective on the image-maker actively creating her own image. Schneemann is gazing at an image of herself, actively manipulating the image produced by the camera through her bodily responses. This is the gaze that I would argue is wholly absent from much of what we encounter of the sexualized body in contemporary media.

Schneemann's visually expressed pleasure in *Fuses* gives permission to *see* and *be seen*.<sup>27</sup> This is both the permission to see a female nude outside the realm of the 'sex object,' the permission to see *her* genitals up close, *her* pleasure, and the permission to see Schneemann as the erotically willed subject creating her **own self-image. Schneemann sums this argument up well** when she states: "I establish my body as a visual territory...The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring, but it is as well votive; written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will."<sup>28</sup> What is important to emphasize here is that the body is seen as an active, image-producing, erotic will. She is not a sex object but a willed erotic subject.



My enduring response to *Fuses* includes a deep respect for the lucid honesty of the work, its unconventional formal techniques and its attempt to disrupt moral codes and taboos. Kristine Stiles notes that Schneemann "has altered ways of seeing by refusing to accept the patriarchal world of autonomous objects and experiences and by insisting on a new method of sight that asserts the contingency of, and fuses, bodies and things."<sup>29</sup> The contingent nature of the at times indistinguishable bodies in *Fuses* reveal Schneemann's refusal to remain within the static roles of active male seducer and passive female receptor. The impression one is left with through the film is a blending of parts and acts, movements and desires, into a blur or fusion.

At a surface level, *Fuses* presents explicit images of Schneemann's lovemaking. However, the film offers much more than a standard photographic representation of this. Her physical interventions on to the film's surface produce a tactile quality within the image. Schneemann's use of hand-manipulated techniques ensures a connection between the artist's body and the image projected, effectively producing a new level of image mediation. Schneemann notes what makes *Fuses* distinct in its approach to visualizing the erotic is that "no one else has dealt with the images of love-making as a core of spontaneous gesture and movement."<sup>30</sup> The film successfully illustrates the spontaneous gestures of sexual intimacy most readily through the hand-processed elements of the film. The film is comprised of multi-layered imagery that provides a sense of energies moving beneath the surface of the photographic footage. The imagery disrupts any sense of 'realism' or stasis within the film, subverting notions of how we visually express our experiences. A sense of kinetic energy rushes through the filmic bodies.

It is the impossibility of viewing her images as static photographic representations that makes us cognizant of the materiality of the film. What Schneemann imprints on to the film through material processes is the energies, pulsations and movement of her body. The body, through the act of painting, mediates its experiences, impulses, drives, and desires. The physical imprint of Schneemann's hands on her work is an act of embodied expression. Such embodied practice allows Schneemann to convey her lived experiences sensually. These practices can help the artist to work against existing images of female sexuality that maybe oppressive to her.

In contemplating more rigorously Schneemann's motivations for making *Fuses*—the desire to see what she felt and to express what sexual pleasure felt like to her—I see implicit within this a desire to re-sensitize the erotic. Schneemann expresses in *Fuses* a reconnection with the erotic impulses in the body. This felt erotic experience brings us in proximity to chaos, excess, something larger than ourselves, the *ecstatic*. This is what she succeeds in visualizing. The attempt by Schneemann to re-infuse the sexual image with ecstasy may be a welcomed addition to the contemporary vernacular of the erotic in art. Perhaps as artists, theorists and supporters of the sexual body we must actively encourage the inclusion of the ecstatic in visual production as a welcome alternative to what for many of us is the plasticized spectacle of mainstream images of sexual pleasure and the female erotic form. The censorship of Schneemann's work contrasts with the ability of her male contemporaries to position the female nude any way they pleased.

This contrast exemplifies the importance of accessing, legitimizing and exploring alternative forms of representing the erotic female nude. Female and male artists interested in exploring the erotic would benefit from contemplating the project laid out by Schneemann throughout her career.

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#### Notes

- 1 Cameron, Dan. Introduction. *Carolee Schneemann: Up to and including her limits*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996, p. 5.
- 2 James, David E. *Allegories of cinema: American film in the sixties*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1988, p. 304.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 321.
- 4 Rich, B. Ruby. *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998 p. 22.
- 5 My use of the term hand processing involves both the literal processing of exposed raw film stock by hand as well as all other techniques of hand manipulation that experimental filmmakers impose on filmstrips including painting, dying, tinting, collaging, scratching, baking, exposing to the elements etc.
- 6 While the parameters of erotic self-portraiture were constructed specifically with *Fuses* in mind, I realize finding other films to fit such particular conditions may be restrictive, thus I recommend the definition I have offered as a guideline. My interest here is to not set up additional, exclusive categories for analysis but to produce a more inclusive examination of what is considered a feminist film.
- 7 James, p. 317.
- 8 Schneemann, Carolee. "The Obscene Body/Politic." *Art Journal*, 50. 4, (Winter 1991), p. 33.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Schneemann, Carolee. *More than Meat Joy: performance works and selected writings*. 1979. ed. Bruce R. McPherson. Kingston, NY: McPherson & Co., 1997, p. 194.
- 11 Constantinides, Kathy. "Carolee Schneemann: Invoking Body Politics." *Michigan Quarterly Review*. 30 (1991), p. 133.
- 12 Schneemann 1991, p. 28.
- 13 *jouissance* is a difficult concept to describe outside of French and is best explained as encompassing 'the whole spectrum of pleasure and enjoyment, sexual and otherwise' (Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers. *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*. New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 118). The word represents the 'enjoyment of rights' of an individual; economic rights to pleasure, sexual rights to pleasure, political rights to pleasure and it represents these rights as occurring all at once – in simultaneous interaction with one another. (Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément. *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1996. p. 165).
- 14 Fabricant, Joel et al. Editorial. *KISS*. 1.6 June 23, 1969, p. 3.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Rich, p. 27.
- 17 Or in the very least, indicates that there are alternative forms in which to experience and represent sex.
- 18 Juhasz, Alexandra. *Women of Vision: histories in feminist film and video*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2001, p. 61.
- 19 The central texts of this early stage of feminist film criticism including Teresa de Lauretis. "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory." *New German Critique*. 34 (Winter 1985), Mary Ann Doane. "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." *Screen*. 23, 3-4 (September-October 1982), Claire Johnston. *Notes on Women's Cinema*. London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973. Annette Kuhn *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1982, Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*. 16. 3 (Autumn 1975).
- 20 Rich, p. 72.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000, p. 35.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 James, p. 318-319.
- 26 Mulvey, p. 47.
- 27 Juhasz, p. 70.
- 28 Schneemann 1991, p. 28.
- 29 Stiles, Kristine. "The Painter as an Instrument of Real Time." *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects*. ed. Carolee Schneemann. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, p. 16.
- 30 Schneemann 1979, p. 32.



## In Memoriam

*The Paradine Case* (1948)



### **Alida Valli**

(1921-2006) gave a strong performance in Hitchcock's *The Paradine Case* but it is with Carol Reed's *The Third Man*, oppsite Joseph Cotten, that she achieved her greatest success.

### **Teresa Wright**

(1918-2006) gained acclaim working for William Wyler in *The Little Foxes*, *Mrs. Miniver* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Her most memorable performance is in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, opposite Joseph Cotten.

*Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)





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